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Prologue

The cherry blossoms are blooming early this year. Thanks to that, the whole town feels brighter this morning. The long winter is over, and a warm spring is on its way. In Hokkaido, we have no choice but to resign ourselves to the overwhelming power of winter. Spring is coming. That one phrase is enough to make me happy.

The Kujou family, whose garden is still buried under deep snow, can't wait for spring. Gran asked me to come over, which is unusual for her. It turns out she wants my help with a big spring cleaning. The Kujou family only consists of women. Although I'm weak, they always ask to borrow my strength at times like these. Even though it's just carrying boxes and wiping high places, I feel moved to be able to experience the Kujou residence's history. I hesitate when I have to kill the spiders that made their home in the corners during the winter.

Before long, I decide to organize the back storage room where I'd been allowed to change clothes before.

"You don't have to touch anything with a cover on it," Gran says while pointing to a piano with a cloth hanging partially inside.

"But isn't it kind of a waste to leave it covered up?"

I try to at least fix the cloth that's falling off of it, but gran quickly stops me.

"...It reminds the master of the house of his dead wives, so leave it as it is. The young lady is probably thinking the same thing these days. She can't bring herself to dispose of it, though."

"I see…"

I really shouldn't touch it, after all. However, just as gran finished murmuring, the cloth falls down completely. It reveals several toys, like building blocks and a tricycle. It's as if it symbolizes now time has stopped for the Kujou family. My chest fills with sadness. Perhaps the child who played with them is no longer in this world.

"..."

Gran looks down at them without saying anything for a while. Soon, gran takes a large object out of it. It seems to be a painting.

"It's a painting of the young lady," Gran says, smiling.

"Of Sakurako-san?"

I didn't know they had any paintings of her.

"No, I meant Kaoruko-sama… The young lady's aunt," she says, looking nostalgic.

"So basically… Sakurako-san's mom's older sister?"

"Yes, that's right. Those two were known for their beauty." Gran chuckles proudly. She looks happy.

"Then Sakurako-san must look just like her mom."

Sakurako-san is beautiful, as long as she doesn't say anything weird. Gran digs an old fashioned asahimame tin out of a desk. When she pops off the rusty lid, I can see an old photograph inside. Eventually, she pulls it out. It's a picture of two women wearing kimono.

"...What is this?"

One is a slender, delicate woman with a stern expression. They look a lot like Sakurako-san when she gets frustrated. Next to her is a tall, confident looking woman with a smile just like Sakurako-san's.

"The taller woman is Kaoruko-sama, she's the older sister. The other girl is Nadeshiko-sama. I'm sure her poor mood is because her sister took her obidome… She looks just like Sakurako-ojousama, doesn't she?" Gran is lovingly looking at the picture.

Kaoruko-san and Nadeshiko-san… They really are beautiful. Kaoruko-san, despite wearing the obidome, looks indifferent.

"But now Kaoruko-san is…"

I glance at the picture resting on gran's lap, only to see that it's a picture of a white butterfly resting on a flower. My heart pounds for a moment.

"Gran, is that…"

The faint writing on the picture says that it's a snow apollo.

"Kaoruko-sama's hobby was drawing, and she especially liked drawing butterflies. She always wanted me to go with her when she went out to sketch."

"R-really…."

A snow apollo. I feel disgusted all of a sudden, for some reason. I've definitely heard that name before.

"So… Where's Kaoruko-san now?"

"..."

Gran hesitates when trying to answer my question. She glances at the tricycle, then returns her gaze to me. She lets out a small sigh.

"...She passed away. The night before her wedding she slipped and fell into a river… Her body hasn't been found yet."

"Huh…?"

The words "her body hasn't been found" give me a strange uneasy feeling. Now everything seems suspicious. Maybe I'm just stupid. I'm probably just overreacting because of the mention of butterflies. Kaoruko-san's smile in the picture doesn't show even a hint of what would become of her. Her gorgeous smile really looks just like Sakurako-san's.

First Bone: Front and Back

Part 1

For Asahikawa, April is the border between winter and spring. For the first half of the month, the flowers aren't really budding like it's spring, but it's also not snowing much like in winter. However, the cold hasn't gone away completely yet, so you have to use the heater during the morning and evening, and occasionally during the day. I'm looking forward to putting away my heavy winter clothes, and taking out my lighter spring coat. Without fail, my mom always says "maybe I should take out spring clothes," after watching the weather forecast. It's

still a bit early to change the tires on the car, though. If you're lucky, crocuses will start to pop up in sunny places in the garden. That's how the first month of the new school year always starts.

My daily life has changed a bit now that I'm in my second year of high school. I was anxious about the class change, but fortunately I'm in the same class as Imai, and Isozaki-sensei is still my homeroom teacher. Kougami is in our class, too. Imai is especially ecstatic about it. He normally has a bit of a grumpy look on his face, but on the day of the class announcement he was in a good mood all day. He even generously threw a 500 yen coin into the donation box in front of the station. 500 yen was too much, Imai.

Kougami seems happy, too. Since she makes lunch for Imai and me twice a week, she's happy we can all eat together. She doesn't seem too happy about having Isozaki-sensei as our homeroom teacher, but I'm relieved about it. I feel like I can rely on Isozaki-sensei for some reason, and I feel at ease around him. Maybe it's more accurate to say that he's just a relaxing person to hang around with. I didn't think so until recently, but I think Sakurako-san trusts him, too. If she trusts someone, I do too.

That's why Imai, Kougami, and I all visited Sakurako-san's house today. It's Imai's first time visiting, so he's surprised by how fancy the house looks, and even more surprised when he sees all the bones. At least Hector and gran are happy. Sakurako-san tells him, "maybe you can help me assemble a skeleton at some point," so I don't think she minds his company. Kougami helps gran prepare for the mini party while Imai and I shovel the remaining snow in the yard, and break up the ice with a big ice pick.

Breaking up the ice is kind of fun. If you hit a cracked part just right, it cracks into a huge ice plate. On the other hand, if you don't find the "sweet spot," it just breaks into tiny pieces, so it's not as easy to move. Imai and I made it a competition to see who can clear out the most ice. It's rare for me to win a competition against Imai, but he hasn't figured out the right way to hold the ice pick yet, so I have a slight advantage.

When we go back inside after working up a sweat, gran has freshly made zangi for us. We could smell something nice from the yard, so we were already looking forward to it before even going inside. There's also my favourite fried shrimp, along with fried Sakhalin surf clam and rice with salty-sweet seasoning.

Kougami says, "this season has the best food," while placing a dish of friend Incan potatoes on the table.

Apparently it's a dish that Kougami's dad serves in his restaurant. She says that simple foods are the best. Over the winter, the potatoes get softer and sweeter, so they're easy to break apart when you eat them. They're lightly seasoned, with just a bit of salt and pepper.

"It's all fried food…" Sakurako-san says, but for boys in their second year of high school, fried foods might as well be a religion. Even though I know my face will be covered in acne tomorrow, I can't just turn my back on all this greasy food. I wonder if it's too much for Kougami?

I was worried we wouldn't be able to finish it all, but we managed to finish everything. Sakurako-san and Kougami also made a simple, delicious cheesecake. It was just eggs and cream cheese put into a food processor then baked, but I ate it with gusto. Gran is overjoyed that Imai eats even more than I do. He suddenly apologizes for intruding unannounced, but

she's happy to have him. I'm secretly a bit jealous that Imai is getting so much attention from gran.

Hector doesn't seem very fond of Imai, so that helps satisfy my greed. I wonder why he doesn't like Imai, though. Hector has been around a lot of death, so maybe Imai smells like someone he loved who died. I suddenly feel nervous. Of course Sakurako-san smells like death, since she handles animal corpses on a daily basis. But then, what about Kougami, gran and I? I wonder if we're familiar with death? I look at Hector cuddling against gran, which only makes me more anxious. I don't want to think about cute little Hector as being a god of death.

Gran looks really happy until it's time for us to go home. I quietly wonder if this is how it feels for her to have her precious grandchild bring friends over to play. I'm a substitute for "Soutarou-kun" to gran. It makes me feel kind of lonely, but I've come to understand it. She didn't make fried shrimp and zangi because they're my favourite foods, it's because they're "Soutarou-kun's" favourites. It's extremely sad and frustrating for me. I know Sakurako-san also feels bad about it. Even so, she can't bear to take "Soutarou-kun" away from gran. It's painful, but I know that if I were in Sakurako-san's position, I'd do the same thing. I would wish for the same thing, spending peaceful days with my loved ones. And if the time limit were nearing its end, even more so. For the gran that I love. Above all, I'm fine with being "Soutarou-kun" for Sakurako-san as well. I wonder what he's thinking up in heaven right now.

That's how my happy, but slightly lonely, new school year began. Hanabusa's looming threat is still frightening, but my days are tranquil. At least I can trust Isozaki-sensei, Imai, and Kougami. I'll be fine as long as I have those three by my side. I have Sakurako-san to protect me, too.

I've been thinking lately about why Hanabusa wants to target me. I still don't know what was written in the letter I received at the tea shop. Maybe it was something related to Soutarou-kun… Or maybe it was about me. Sakurako-san had absolutely no intention of letting me see the letter, but something about that letter prompted her to say she'd protect me. Did that letter mention something she'd have to protect me from? The more I think about it, the scarier it seems.

Hanabusa, also known as Phantom. A serial killer, but also my email buddy. He's an evil person who tempts others to commit murder, then steals the "butterfly" from inside the skull. I hope he's lost interest in us over the winter. That's all I want. I'm scared of spring - the season of butterflies. That's why I want to treasure the time I have with Imai and Kougami right now.

Kougami looks behind her across the classroom and smiles at me. We were already good friends when we were in separate classes, but now that we're in the same class, we've been spending more time together. That goes for Imai, too. Maybe Sakurako-san or Isozaki-sensei requested this for me.

Sometimes it's fun to hang out with Kougami without Imai around. It's probably just my imagination, but having a girl around feels relaxing and calming. Kougami is cute, too. If Imai didn't have a crush on her, I might have fallen for her, too. Her smile cheers me up. The scent of her shampoo gets my heart racing.

I'm still worried, but at least I have my peaceful school life. So I wonder why it doesn't feel fun? I started to feel a strange anxiety in my chest when the new transfer student arrived.

Her name is Ranka Azechi. The school rules are pretty loose, but she's taking it too far with black lace sewn to her uniform, black makeup around her eyes, and blue lipstick. She made quite a stir in the classroom. She's quiet and keeps to herself, but she still got people talking since the first day she transferred. The only person who tried to get to know her was Kougami, who sits right in front of her. Still, she only puts the bare minimum into her replies, like she has no interest in Kougami at all.

About 10 days after she transferred here, while Kougami and I were stapling handouts for Isozaki-sensei while waiting for Imai to finish club activities so we could go home together, Azechi approaches us.

"I want to be your friend," she says, much to our surprise.

It's been two weeks since the new term started. It was a warm day that afternoon, the first time the temperature hit over 20 degrees.

Part 2

Ranka Azechi is a very unique transfer student. She's a little shorter than Kougami, and her black hair is braided on one side only. Her modifications to the school uniform are just barely within regulation. Her black knee-high socks and lace ribbon make it look like a gothic lolita outfit. And above all, her makeup makes it look like she's ill. It looks like her skin was pale to begin with. However, the makeup around her eyes makes it look like she's bruised, and her lips are either blue or black. Her nails are painted black, as well. It seems that the public morals teacher got mad at her, because after a few days she started colouring them a more moderate colour. She looks like she's from a horror movie, or a Halloween costume.

That's why when she approached us, I felt a bit scared deep down. I have goosebumps. It feels like I'm always on the lookout for Hanabusa.

"I want to be your friend," Azechi says just as abruptly as she appeared. Her voice is low, like she doesn't want anyone to hear.

"Friend?" Kougami repeats, surprised.

"Yeah, yours, Kougami."

"Mine?"

Whether it's because it's comfortable talking to another girl, or simply Kougami's nerves of steel, she listens without changing her expression.

"Yeah. It's not a joke, I'm serious. I want to be your friend."

"Huh? Umm…"

However, even Kougami would feel bewildered by such a sudden request. She gives me a sidelong glance, asking for help.

"This is kind of abrupt, isn't it, Azechi?"

I have a bad feeling about this, I have to protect Kougami if something happens. I try to put myself between them, but Azechi pushes me out of the way like I'm just in the way.

"Of course, I don't really want to get too personal with you, or get involved with you. Basically, I want to be friends just for appearances."

"Just for appearances… I don't think that's a good thing to do, though." Kougami sounds troubled, but she doesn't let her smile slip.

Azechi soon starts to look upset.

“It doesn’t matter whether it’s good or bad. You just have to pretend like we’re friends while we’re at school. It doesn’t matter if you hate me. I think this would benefit you, as well.”

“How so?”

“The number 3 is terrible, isn’t it, Kougami-san?”

“...” Kougami freezes.

What’s all this about the number 3 supposed to mean? I tilt my head to the side. When I move my head, I notice Imai’s bag sitting on his desk. Imai, Kougami, and me. That’s 3 of us. What’s wrong with that?

“So? You’ll do it, right? Let’s pretend to be friends.”

What an impolite, one-sided request. Naturally, there’s no way Kougami would agree to that. At least, that’s what I thought. Kougami looks like she’s still reluctant to agree.

“...Then what should I call you? ‘Azechi-san’ would seem weird if we’re friends, right?”

After a while of silence, Kougami surprises me with her response. She has a look of determination on her face.

“Huh? Kougami? Azechi?”

“You can call me Ranka. What about you?”

“Yuriko is fine.”

Despite my confusion, they both start discussing it like they’ve reached a mutual understanding. I can’t understand what’s going on between them, or why Kougami is acting like this.

“It’s strange, isn’t it? Yuri and Ran, I mean.” Kougami says it like it’s some kind of spell. She starts to smile. It’s her normal expression again.

“Everything’s set, then. It’s like we were destined to meet.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right… Well, thanks again, Ranka.”

Kougami holds out her right hand to Azechi. Azechi grabs it with both hands, and Kougami puts her left hand on top. They look like close friends.

“See you tomorrow, Yuriko. Oh yeah, those bears on your phone. I don’t like them at all, but is it okay if I put on the same one tomorrow?”

“I bought it from LoFt in front of the station. They come in different colours, but they should have the same ones as Mana and Chika. I’m thinking of getting a new school bag. Want to go buy it together?”

“Yeah, let’s do that. Well, I’m leaving now.”

“Ah… okay. Got it. See you tomorrow.”

“Yep.”

I’m still confused as their conversation ends and they let go of each other’s hands. After letting go, Azechi leaves the classroom with a composed expression on her face. I look at Kougami, puzzled, but she seems like she’s thinking about something. For a moment I think Azechi came back, but it’s Imai. He seems a bit surprised by the atmosphere, and furrows his brow.

“...What’s wrong?”

“Nothing… It’s just…”

What should I even say? Do I say that Kougami and Azechi are planning a lie?

“I mean, what was that just now, Kougami?”

“Mm.” She just gives a non-answer to my question.

“No, well, it’s not…” Kougami gives a troubled sigh. “It’s just… I think Azechi-san and I are going to be friends tomorrow.”

“Azechi? You mean the transfer student?” Imai looks puzzled.

Of course he does. He’s never seen the two of them getting along with each other.

“Anyway, I’ll be counting on you and Tatewaki-kun.”

“W-what’s with that?!”

“It’s fine. It’s probably just something boys don’t get.” Kougami says, sounding somewhat angry that we don’t get it.

I don’t understand at all.

But just as Kougami said, they’re “friends” starting the next day. When they see each other, they both run over to meet up. They move between classrooms together, and even have matching bags. I also notice that they touch each other a lot. Linking arms, holding hands, things like that. They even hug when they greet each other. Azechi in particular touches Kougami’s hair a lot. When the two of them are talking to each other, Azechi is basically always tying up Kougami’s hair. She usually makes it into a one-sided braid, like she has. Kougami seems to accept it.

At first, people seemed to be wondering why Azechi was acting so different from before, but people eventually got used to it. Thanks to Kougami, Azechi seems to be getting used to the class. However, Imai and I can’t seem to get used to her. The Kougami that sits beside Azechi doesn’t seem like the normal Kougami, either. Since the two of them are “best friends” now, Kougami only has lunch with us twice a week. She only eats with us on days when she makes us lunch.

Imai and Azechi in particular don’t get along well at all, which is mostly Azechi’s fault. Everything felt so calm and relaxed before, but now Azechi has thrown a monkey wrench into my daily life. The one who has it the worst is Kougami, who is caught between everything. She spends basically every day putting out fires between Imai and Azechi. The two of them end up fighting whenever they’re together, even knowing how much trouble it causes for Kougami. Imai is usually pretty aloof, but even he gets emotional when it comes to Azechi. It’s basically like they’re fighting over Kougami’s attention.

“Huh? Chikuwa?” Yuri & Ran both say with surprise in unison.

At lunch, we moved from the topic of how everyone’s family makes tamagoyaki to how Imai’s family makes pork soup.

“Putting… Chikuwa in pork soup is normal,” Imai mumbles in disappointment.

“No, it’s weird!” Azechi laughs.

“W-well maybe it’s one of those unexpectedly good combinations?”

“Yeah, it is. It’s good, and it goes well with the pork. I love the way Imai’s family makes it.”

I feel sorry for Kougami, since she has to help keep things peaceful between them. It’s true, though. The pork and miso soup that Imai’s family makes is amazing. It’s so rich that there’s almost no broth. Maybe it’s to sate Imai’s appetite as much as possible. The

combination of the various vegetables, pork, and chewy chikuwa makes it feel really comforting and filling.

“My mom always makes it with cabbage and mushrooms. It’s so good, but it’s different from the pork soup they serve for lunch, so I’ve always thought the one they serve is weird. I wonder if every family is like that,” Kougami says shyly.

I see, it must be a food where it’s good no matter what you put in it. I want to eat the one that Kougami’s family makes.

“We always make it with sweet potatoes instead of regular ones. My mom likes it sweet. It’s my favourite on the second day when the potatoes have absorbed some of the broth so they’re all soft. We always make enough for 2 or 3 days.”

“I get that. Pork soup is so good the next day. What about your family, Ranka?”

“I… put in taro and flour dumplings,” Azechi says softly with a tuna sandwich in one hand.

“That’s the pork soup I tried before, right?”

“Yeah, when you were over at my place.” Imai sounds a bit pleased.

“Wow… that sounds delicious. I’m almost full now, though. Oh, yeah! Why don’t we all bring some pork soup and we can compare them?”

“Yeah! I’ll ask my parents, and we can all bring some next time.”

Even though we try to keep the mood up with eager replies, Azechi and Imai still don’t get along. It gives me a headache. I wonder how long these days are going to continue. But if I say anything, it’ll probably put Kougami in a tight spot. I feel bad that I can’t do anything to help Imai even though we’re in the same class.

“Oh, I’m going to my grandpa’s house today, so I’ll head home first.” I say to Kougami when we’d normally wait for Imai together after school.

“Azechi, we’re going in the same direction, let’s go home together.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s go.”

Azechi, who has been playing with Kougami’s hair, is bewildered by the sudden invitation. I pull on her hand.

“Don’t touch me!”

She swats my hand away with pure disgust, but I still try to grab her hand again.

“Kougami, could you wait on your own for a little bit? Imai will be back soon.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah… sure…”

Kougami looks surprised, and Azechi looks disappointed, but I pretend not to notice. I carry both my bag and Azechi’s bag in my free hand. Azechi seems to give up on resisting, but she still looks disappointed.

“Let go,” Azechi says once we reach the entrance. “I’m not going to run away or anything.”

We also can’t change our shoes like that. I reluctantly let go of her hand. I didn’t fully believe her that she’d stay, but she puts on her shoes and waits for me. We both start walking in silence.

“...Why did you invite me?”

“No reason in particular.”

I probably should have given a proper answer. We're definitely not close enough to be holding hands and walking home together. I also know that Kougami and Azechi are only pretending to be friends.

"...I just want to let Kougami and Imai hang out alone sometimes."

"Are they going out together?"

"No, but Imai wants to."

"Really?"

"...Maybe."

I only said it because I was going with the flow, but now I regret it. If possible, I want to be a little more cautious around her.

"...But I think you're giving him too much extra help."

"Huh?"

"I mean, they should go at their own pace, right?"

"...Their "own pace" has been thrown out of whack with you here." I accidentally let a bit of anger slip into my tone of voice.

"It's my fault?"

"No… Ah, I didn't mean to be rude or anything." I quickly try to apologize after seeing that she's on the verge of tears.

"Tatewaki-kun… Which of them do you like?"

"Huh? I'm their friend, so both."

"No, not that kind of like."

For a moment, I don't understand what she means.

"..." We stare at each other in silence.

"...What?"

I finally understand what she's getting at.

"No, hold on! What kind of question is that?!"

If I liked Kougami, it would be bad for Imai. There's also no way I'd be in love with Imai.

"Who do you like, then?"

"Huh?"

Azechi gives me a nonchalant look while I get flustered. I can't tell her who. I don't have anyone special to me like that. Yeah, there's no one. There's no way there would be. Of course I didn't picture the smile of an older woman.

"Nobody!"

Azechi blinks, slightly surprised, when I accidentally raise my voice.

"What about you, Azechi?"

She basically just transferred schools. She may not like anyone in Asahikawa yet, but she might have a significant other back in Sapporo.

"I don't have anyone I like, either. I'm fine being single. I only wish for the silence of death."

"Silence of death?"

"Yeah. You don't long for it? True freedom, liberation of the soul. You can content yourself with being a mere servant, but I'll rise the ranks of darkness."

"...Right..."

Azechi suddenly becomes talkative, speaking as if she's reciting a poem. She applies black lipstick. I feel strangely uncomfortable, like someone touched the back of my neck.

"But… you probably shouldn't say weird things like that to Kougami."

"Weird?"

"Like life and death and stuff. Kougami probably wouldn't like that."

Azechi often talks about unfortunate news. She seems interested in cases where someone died. Kougami always listens with a clouded expression. Sometimes talking to Kougami gets me thinking. Her run down expression at Asahi Bridge in the winter, and how sometimes Isozaki-sensei is worried about her. Kougami still feels responsible for her grandmother's death. In her mind, she still thinks she killed her grandma, even knowing it was an accident.

"I don't care if she doesn't like it. It doesn't matter to me."

"Even though you're friends?"

"It's just for appearances."

"But I still don't think you should say things that make other people uncomfortable, even if you're just pretending to get along."

Azechi huffs at me. She doesn't seem happy with what I said.

"What about you, Tatewaki-kun?"

"Me?"

"Don't you find it exciting to hear about a person's death? Don't you want to drink a person's flowing blood? Don't you want to see a decomposing corpse up close?"

"Stop it!"

I don't. I don't want that at all.

"A person's death is nothing but sad and unpleasant! I've heard that people are made to think that way so they don't feel like they want to seek out death. It's instinct to detest and fear death!"

I know that all too well. An unfortunate corpse that has been sitting for ages. The scent of that corpse as it rots. The flow of blood. The white bones. The way water changes the body's shape. And I know about how the people left behind feel.

"Never say that again! I mean it!"

"...Are you mad?"

"Of course I am!"

It's only natural. How could I stay calm after hearing that?

"...Tatewaki-kun, you're weird too."

Azechi brings her face close to mine, looking curious. Her big, black eyes stare into mine.

"I'm normal."

"I wonder about that." She snickers. "Maybe you're the only one who thinks that way."

That's not true. I'm normal. The part that isn't normal is the influence that person has had on me.

Part 3

After school the next day I decide not to go home with the other three.

“Oh, I’m going to my grandpa’s house today again.”

“Which one?

I have three grandpas. Imai knows about that.

“The Mizuyama one. It’s for judo practice.”

“You do judo?”

Apparently it’s surprising to Azechi.

“Yeah… well…”

I’ve never really taken it seriously, but now I want to know a bit of self defence. I don't want to explain all that to Azechi, and I don’t really like talking to her anyway, so I just vaguely agree with her.

“See you, then.”

Imai waves as he heads to his club.

“Yeah, be careful.”

“Yep.”

Isozaki-sensei asked Kougami and Azechi to help him with some things today. I head out of the school quickly so I don’t get dragged into it. My destination is Mizuyama. I’m not actually going to my grandpa’s house, though.

The silence in the Kujou house always has a feeling of kindness. I go to Sakurako-san’s house, and as usual I pet Hector while gran hands me a cup of tea in the living room.

“What’s wrong? You seem upset,” Sakurako-san says to me in a puzzled voice while she sits in her usual chair.

“Nothing, really… It’s not a big deal.”

“Is that so?”

It’s just stuff within my class that isn’t going well. Sakurako-san is busy looking for Hanabusa, and she isn’t good with people anyway, so there’s no point in talking to her about it. Sakurako-san calls Hector over with a rawhide bone in her hand to give him, and stares at me. It’s like she’s trying to look straight through me and look at my bones.

“...I recently made a new friend. No, we’re not really friends, actually.”

“Oh?”

Sakurako-san puts her left hand on her knee and lightly taps Hector’s rawhide bone against it while she listens. It feels intimidating. I feel like she’s mad at me for talking about something so unimportant. In the end, I tell her all about how Azechi appearing has thrown us into chaos over the past several days. She seems a little bored, but she still listens to me.

“It’s weird, right? Doesn’t it seem unnatural?”

“But why did Yuriko accept her proposal?”

“I’ve been wondering about that, too. I can’t think of a reason. Azechi said something about the number 3 being bad. Imai, Kougami, and me make three people. I wonder if she hasn’t been having fun hanging out with us.”

“I wonder about that.” Sakurako-san folds her arms while she thinks.

Hector realizes he’s not being pet anymore, and presses his wet nose against me.

“But what I really don’t like about Azechi is how she talks about people dying as if it’s a game. Whenever there’s a news story about someone dying, she talks about it like it’s funny.

She says things like death is a symbol of freedom, and corpses are exciting, and talks about wanting to die and kill people. If it's some kind of joke, she's gone way too far."

Sakurako-san tolerates death. She has her own rules, though. To her, death is normal, but taking someone's life away is evil. That's why I thought she would be angry about Azechi's personality and taste, too. However, she just deeply exhales, as if she's troubled.

"Well… Adolescent girls usually think about life and death, though there are individual differences. Trying to learn about yourself can lead some people to think about death. Women menstruate. They shed blood once per month."

Her words surprise me. Sakurako-san quietly speaks to me. She's looking at me like I'm a little kid.

"Life and death are opposites. Women feel both in their body. I also think that girl's words and actions are unsavoury. I don't think they're unusual, though."

"..."

"I understand why you're angry, though. You're kind. You've encountered corpses many times, as well."

Though her next words sound soothing, I can feel a hidden meaning behind them.

"You're still a child, after all." She says it like it's no big deal.

I can feel my face turning red from anger and embarrassment.

"That's no reason at all. But… I wonder if she could say things like that in front of someone who has actually lost someone. I wonder if she could even stand the scent of blood and decomposing bodies."

I shouldn't have said anything about it. I'm even more angry and embarrassed at how childish I'm acting. Even the sound of my own voice feels like it's mocking my immaturity.

"Anyway, just don't pay any attention to her. Think of this as a piece of wisdom from an adult; just ignore her."

"It's easier said than done…"

"I can't fix this for you. Talk to Yuriko about it. I'm sure you two can come up with a solution without my intervention."

Sakurako-san asks gran for another cup of tea. Gran already prepared some milk tea for me, so she pours it into my cup. The steam coming off of it is warm and smells like milk. Just one sip of it completely relaxes me.

"But… I'm worried that Kougami will think I'm upset with her."

"Yuriko isn't an idiot. She might want to ditch that Azechi girl off as much as you do. Don't worry about it."

"But they're kind of friends…"

I feel like saying I want to "ditch" her is a bit harsh… Of course I don't want to just ignore her. I wonder if Kougami would be willing to do something so drastic? I glance at Sakurako-san as she takes a sip from her cup.

"Don't worry. Women are people, too."

Part 4

Whether what Sakurako-san said is the right thing to do or not, I still learned a few things. After all, Kougami and Azechi have to pretend to be friends all day, every day while at school. Now that I think about it, I wonder if Kougami is doing okay? She has to help take care of her grandpa, help with the store, and do housework for her mom. She's good at managing her time, so she always has some free time, but now she's always hanging out with friends after school. At least it must be convenient having school to clearly draw a line in her relationship with Azechi.

I think they've gradually been creating distance between themselves lately. I wonder if she listened to my advice? Azechi hasn't been talking about corpses in front of Kougami as much lately, too.

It's been half a month since Azechi transferred. Everything around me has been changing rapidly. Apparently the snow will melt earlier than usual this year, and the cherry blossoms will bloom early as well. It's true that the cherry blossom buds are turning red and starting to swell, waiting for warmer days.

Golden week starts the day after tomorrow. It's an afternoon during the holiday. I'm walking to my grandpa's house in Mizuyama without a coat because I thought it'd get too hot. When I get to the neighbourhood convenience store… I catch a glimpse of Azechi leaving it. Even though it's a holiday, she's wearing one of her usual over the top, frilly, doll-like outfits. I knew her house was nearby.

I worry about whether I should call out to her or ignore her since she doesn't seem to have noticed me. She climbs onto her bike. I wonder how she rides a bike in those clothes. Just as our eyes meet, I see a car coming up fast behind her that doesn't seem to have noticed she's there.

"Ah!" I let out a short scream.

A moment later, the car hits Azechi's bike hard. Fortunately, Azechi gets thrown onto the sidewalk while the car drags just the bike. Or maybe it's unfortunate that she got hit at all. The bike drags along under the car for a short while before falling out. The car drives away without stopping.

"Azechi!"

I rush over to her. I'm not totally sure since it happened so fast, but I don't think the car hit her directly.

"Tatewaki… kun?"

"Are you okay?!"

Kneeling on the ground, the stunned Azechi slowly nods. It doesn't look like the car is coming back.

"Crap, did you see the license plate?"

"Nope, not at all. By the time I realized I was on the ground…"

She clumsily tries to explain while panicked. Her face is pale, she looks completely terrified. Even with all her white makeup, I can still tell.

"It's awful what happened to your bike."

"Do you think it can be fixed?"

"No… You're probably better off buying a new one."

The frame is completely bent.

"Well, nothing I can do about it now." Azechi mumbles, weakly sitting on the ground.

Buildings in Asahikawa have large parking lots. Each house usually has space for 2-3 cars to park in the driveway. That's probably the reason why people get lazy when parking. Seeing cars parked at an angle, or taking up 2 spaces at the supermarket is an everyday thing. But that doesn't mean it's okay to drive carelessly like that.

"Let's ask at the convenience store if they have a security camera that caught it. We should report it to the police, too. They might be able to track them."

I try to head to the door to ask the clerk.

"You can't! Don't… tell the police."

Azechi holds on tightly to my arm.

"But…"

"I don't want to cause problems for my aunt."

Why would this bother her aunt? I can't bring myself to say anything, since she's trying so hard to stop me. I notice that her cheek is scratched up and red. There's a tear in her dress, and there's blood dripping from her knee where her tights got torn.

"For now… Should we go to the hospital?"

"No, I'm fine." She shakes her head.

"Then… Can you stand?"

"I'm really fine. I was just a bit surprised."

I hold my hand out for her. She seems surprised by it, so it takes a second for her to grab it.

"...Ngh!" She grunts in pain.

It looks like she twisted her ankle or something.

"Then I'll take you to your house for now."

It can't be helped. Azechi stubbornly sighs, but eventually she leans on my shoulder.

"Is your house nearby? Please try to tolerate this for a while. I know you don't like me. I know you don't want to go to the hospital, but make sure you ice your ankle."

For now we decide to leave her bike with the convenience store employee. I pick up her stuff and start walking. Eventually she reluctantly leans against my shoulder. I'm sure it's only because it hurts too much for her to handle on her own.

"...I thought you would've ignored me." (TL note: She uses a weird term for ignored)

Azechi says quietly.

"Ignored you?"

"Nevermind, it's nothing."

It's a word I've never heard before. Is it something they say in Sapporo? Hokkaido was developed by immigrants so there's a lot of dialectal variations even in small areas. For example, Isozaki-sensei is from Sapporo and sometimes uses the term "azuru" to mean he's having trouble with something, but my cousin, Kyouko-neechan, lives in Sapporo but has never heard of the term. Even within a city there can be words some people don't understand.

"Somehow… I have a feeling it means something bad."

"Yep. That's why I won't tell you what it means."

Well, it doesn't really bother me whether I know it or not.

"You shouldn't say mean things to someone who's helping you."

"Whatever, I don't need you," Azechi says sulkily.

Does she really want me to let go that bad?

“That was a lie. Sorry. Thanks…” Azechi panics and apologizes to me, apparently guessing what I’m thinking.

She finally showed some manners. I thought it was surprising, but she seems really upset right now. She holds on to me, trembling a bit. Her body must be under a lot of strain. Azechi probably really hates being touched by me. I feel bad for her since she has no choice but to rely on me.

Fortunately, Azechi’s house is nearby. However, it’s the type of apartment where the first floor is a garage, so I have to help her up the stairs. As you’d expect, I’m a bit embarrassed about it. Upon arriving, Azechi sits down at the front door.

“...Are you okay?”

“I’m relieved, I was so scared…” Azechi says, pushing her tightly clenched fist against her mouth.

She’s been holding back tears. Has she been holding back because I’m here, or because she’s frustrated? She’s trying her hardest to cry without making any noise. Dark tears flow down her cheeks.

“Really… are you sure you don’t want to go to the police or hospital?”

“I’m fine. My aunt is being kind enough to let me stay at her house right now, so I don't want to worry or bother her. If they contacted my parents they’d want to know what happened, or get angry at me.”

“I… see…”

“I’m… a problem child.” Azechi forces herself to laugh a bit, and looks at me with her tear stained face.

“...Then I’ll treat your injuries. Please let me.”

Azechi’s house, or I guess her aunt’s apartment, is neatly arranged, and fairly normal. We head to Azechi’s room.

“Your room isn’t dark.”

“Huh? Oh, well I haven’t gotten most of my luggage yet.”

“Hmm.”

Azechi stumbles a bit as she limps around to get me the first aid kit and a cold can of pop. I thank her. This is the first time I’ve touched a girl’s bare feet. It’s only because she’s injured, though. I don’t hesitate to disinfect it thoroughly, wrap her ankle in bandages, and put a compress on it. Azechi doesn’t want to see her own injury, so she closes her eyes and turns away. Even though she’s always talking about how blood is beautiful.

After I finish treating her, we’re both relieved. I turn away from Azechi, since I don’t want her to think I’m staring at her legs or anything. I notice an unopened cardboard box labelled “cards.”

“Cards?”

“Oh, yeah. I collect them. Playing cards, tarot cards, stuff like that.”

“Those are like fortune telling cards, right?”

I ask if it’s okay to open them, and she says it’s fine. There’s lots of cards tightly packed together. I’d guess there’s around 20 or so.

“Wow, cool!”

“I’ve been collecting them since elementary school. I still have more at home. I think I have around 300-400 of them.”

“Wow… These are pretty.”

I take a few out to look at. There’s a card with a flower and a brightly coloured butterfly.

“...”

Even though it’s pretty, it still gives me chills.

“Tatewaki-kun, do you… Not like butterflies?”

“Yeah, well…”

“I think they’re pretty.”

She opens a can of pop and takes a sip. I think they’re pretty, too. No, I used to think that. It’s different now. Now… Butterflies look like messengers for the dead to me.

“Hey, did you know that there’s a butterfly in each person’s head?”

Humans have a butterfly right in the middle of their heads. Azechi’s words overlap with Sakurako-san’s.

“The sphenoid bone…”

“So you did know?”

“I do, though I can’t say why.”

The sphenoid bone spreads its wings behind the nose and eyes. I know it all too well. The corpses that are missing their sphenoid bones. Hanabusa’s collection. A person who steals those beautiful butterflies from inside the dead.

“Tatewaki-kun… You know a lot about bones.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I see. I’ll show you something special as thanks, then.”

“As thanks?”

Azechi is talking in her usual, somehow rude sounding, husky voice. It seems she’s calmed down from when she was scared of seeing her own blood earlier. She takes a plastic case out of her desk drawer. The important “thing” must be inside.

“What is it?”

“A skull. A real one.”

“Is it… a canine?”

It’s the skull of an animal with a slightly elongated nose. It looks a lot like the raccoon skull that Sawa-san showed me at Asahiyama once, but the canine teeth and dentition are different.

“That’s right. It’s a dog skull. It was my pet dog. It died of old age. I didn’t kill it. It was so pretty that I kept it as a specimen.”

Azechi talks about it like it’s strange, but I’m already used to seeing animal skulls. Although I’m still not good with bones that have flesh attached still, this skull is completely clean and dry. If Azechi had killed it herself then I would have been surprised. Since it was old age, there’s nothing strange about it. Sakurako-san also cherishes her specimens of Radius and Ulna, her pet cats.

“Did you make it yourself? It looks good.”

“Really?”

“There’s no cartilage left, and you’ve removed the grease so there’s no bugs. How did you do it? Did you use a pot? A fish tank?”

Using a fish tank full of air is a really simple way of getting the flesh off bones, and it doesn't smell as much. Simmering is the smelliest, especially for the skull. Sakurako-san simmers hers, but Sawa-san recommends using the fish tank method.

"Huh?"

Apparently Azechi doesn't know about it. She stares at me in confusion.

"Ah, no, I'm just talking about the bones. I heard recently that putting them in a temperature-controlled fish tank full of air and leaving it is the best way to remove the flesh, so I was wondering if you knew about it."

"W-where did you hear that?"

"Ah, it's just that it's so clean that I thought it probably wasn't your first time."

Azechi makes a strange face and turns away from me. I wonder if I hurt her feelings. Well, it's fine.

I look at the dog skull. It's put together really neatly. It looks like something Sakurako-san would make. The bottom is flat, so it rests nicely against the table. As I examine the specimen more carefully, I gradually start to feel uneasy.

"...Can I take a picture of it?"

"Sure, but…"

I feel like there's something strange about it. I don't really know what it is, though. I really do think it's well made, though.

"I'll check with Sakurako-san when I get home," I think while I put down my phone.

Still, the more I look around, the more I realize how bleak the room is. The closet, desk, bed, and sheets are all just simple, blue striped. There's cardboard on a dark brown, wire rack. That's all I can see. I suddenly notice that there's a white dogi hanging on the curtain rod.

"Is that your dogi, Azechi?"

It doesn't match the goth loli, occult loving Azechi, so I'm surprised when she confirms it. Azechi grimaces.

"I-I just happened to leave it there, I don't really use it."

"Just happened to?"

How do you "just happen to" have a dogi in your room? It even looks well worn. As far as I can tell, it's probably seen quite a few battles. But it seems like a bad idea to press her for answers, since she looks like she's in a bad mood now. I finish drinking my pop and get up.

"Well, thanks for showing me that skull."

I thank her while trying not to burp from the gas in the pop. Azechi tries to get up to show me out, but I put up my hand to tell her it's okay, since her foot is sore.

"...Thanks for your help today." Azechi thanks me, despite looking annoyed.

I don't think she wanted me to see her when she was hurt or crying. I feel bad for her, but I'm also glad she wasn't alone in that situation. I can imagine her pushing her bike home, covered in scratches, trying to hide what happened from her aunt.

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone about what happened today. It's too bad about your bike, but I'm glad you didn't get any serious injuries."

She breathes a sigh of relief. It's not like I'd want to tell anyone in the first place.

"Anyway, if later on you get a headache, trouble breathing, or your injuries get worse, go to the hospital right away. I know you don't want to be a bother, but if something more serious happens, it'll upset your aunt even more."

“Okay… Got it.”

I wasn’t trying to sound like I’m scolding her, but she meekly nods at me. She looks nothing like she did earlier, when she was scratched up and crying.

“See ya.”

It’s too early to go home. Maybe I’ll stop by my grandpa’s house. I start putting on my jacket, but Azechi suddenly grabs my sleeve.

“Thank you for today! But from now on, don’t talk to me outside. Just ignore me if you notice me! I’m not normal! I have animal bones in my room!”

“I wouldn’t say you’re not normal. As far as I can see, you’re a normal girl with a hobby that’s in slightly bad taste.”

That’s right. Bones aren’t unusual. There’s nothing strange about someone who has bones. There’s various reasons someone would have them. There’s people like Sakurako-san who collect them as a hobby or passion, others might study them for science or medicine, and some people like Sawa-san hold them to ascertain the weight of life.

“H-how would you know, Tatewaki?!”

“Because I have skeletal specimens, too! You’re not that special, Azechi. I don’t know why you’re insisting on that so much!”

I return her inflammatory tone. As Azechi’s tone gets firmer, I start talking louder. I feel the same way I do when Sakurako-san brushes me off. Sakurako-san is weird, but just this much isn’t abnormal. I’m not good at expressing my point, though.

“I’m a strange girl who longs for death! I love corpses!”

“Don’t say those things! Corpses aren’t beautiful, they’re sad! I can say that because I’ve seen one, unlike you, Azechi! You can’t even look at your own injury?! You were scared and trembling after that accident earlier!”

“...”

“Ah…”

Azechi instantly falls silent as her face distorts and she starts to cry. I realize I said too much. I didn’t mean to go that far.

“I’m sorry…”

I quickly try to apologize, but Azechi presses her fist to her mouth again, desperately trying to stop crying. This is the first time in my life that I’ve said too much and made a girl cry. It’s a truly awful feeling.

“I’m really sorry…” I try apologizing again, but I don’t get a reply.

She’s so angry that I don’t even know what to say to her, so I just end up leaving her house. After worrying for a bit, I walk past my grandpa’s house and head to Sakurako-san’s. I don’t want to think about Azechi right now, but I can’t stop worrying about the dog skull. Maybe it’s just intellectual curiosity.

“Is it a dog skull?”

“Yeah. She said it was a pet dog that died of old age. Somehow it feels a little strange… I don’t know how to explain it, but something seems off.”

I pull out my phone and show her the picture while we’re still in the entranceway. A beautiful, clean, white skull. The teeth are all aligned, and there don’t seem to be any missing.

“What do you think?”

“Hmm…”

Sakurako-san whistles when she sees it. Hector greets me by pushing his whole body into me and licking my face all over. I turn my head to avoid him, but I'm secretly happy about it. It's comforting, after messing up so badly at Azechi's house.

"This was a good idea. You've learned a lot about bones."

"That's not something I want to be an expert in… Anyway, can you tell anything from this? It rubbed me the wrong way, somehow."

"Ah… For now, try to bring that girl here tomorrow."

"Huh?"

"I want to talk to someone else who enjoys skeletons. I'm inviting her here. I want to show my collection to her," she says, spreading her arms wide.

Part 5

I was uneasy all day at school the next day. Azechi won't look me in the eye, or talk to me. She used makeup to hide the scratches on her face. Her sprained ankle still looks sore, but she's desperately trying to keep it a secret. Since she won't talk to me face to face, I have to relay the message about visiting Sakurako-san to her through Kougami. Naturally, Azechi didn't want to go, but Kougami managed to convince her. She was reluctant to follow me, though. It must be hard to walk there with a sore foot. Since Sakurako-san's house is quite a way away, I offer to carry her bag. None of us want to say anything, so most of the trip is spent in silence.

"A bone specialist?"

"Yeah. Her name is Sakurako Kujou-san. She used to go to our school, too."

Kougami proudly explains who Sakurako-san is on the way. She says she's a beautiful, cool, high class lady.

"Why would someone like that go to our school? I didn't think it was such a fancy high school." Azechi says curiously.

"It actually used to be an all girls school back then."

"Just because it was an all girls school doesn't mean it was nice, though. I did a lot of research on the schools here before I transferred, and there seems to be a lot of schools intended toward rich girls. Why would she go to our school or all places?"

"Umm?"

Kougami looks at me as if she's asking me to answer Azechi.

"Ah, I don't really know, either…"

To be honest, I've always wondered the same thing. In the past the school rules were strict, and I know it used to be an all girls school, but I still find it hard to convince myself she used to go to our school.

"Imai-kun and I chose it because of the strong tennis club, right?" Kougami says, looking at Imai.

Imai nods.

Our school's tennis club is probably the best in Northern Hokkaido, and I've been told it's in the top 4 out of all of Hokkaido.

"I didn't really know where I wanted to go, so I just chose the same school as Imai."

“That’s your only reason?” Azechi says, and raises one eyebrow suspiciously as Imai and I, who are fist bumping.

Ah, friendship.

“What about you, Ranka?”

“Because it’s safe.”

“Just because of that?”

She could at least give a proper answer. For some reason I start to feel angry.

“I think it’s fine. I’m glad you found a place that’s safe.”

“Right…”

Kougami just agrees with her to keep the peace. I feel a little troubled, so I just stare at my toes while I walk.

“But… It’s kind of hard to believe that Sakurako-san used to go to our school. She should have gone to a school for rich girls, or a place with better standard scores. I don’t think she had bad grades in school.”

“Yeah… I guess so.”

She said before that she didn’t go to university because her parents didn’t want her to pursue higher education. Apparently since she already had a marriage partner arranged, they deemed university unnecessary. I think she must have really wanted to go to the school where her uncle worked. In forensic pathology. Or maybe she would have gone somewhere to study forensic anthropology outside of Hokkaido.

While we continue to talk, we can soon see the Kujou residence.

“...Woah,” Azechi lets out a quiet gasp of surprise.

“She really is a high class lady…”

“Gran is here, too, so it’ll be the two of them today.”

And the watchdog, of course.

“I’ve been waiting for you, young master. The young lady is waiting.”

Gran and Hector come out to meet us as soon as I ring the bell. As usual, Hector doesn’t like Imai. Apparently he doesn’t like Azechi, either. He avoids the two of them, and jumps all over Kougami and I.

“Oh, you’re here. Welcome.”

Sakurako-san is waiting in the hallway by the entrance in a white dress.

“Amazing…”

Azechi walks to the living room, looking around in shock. It’s only natural. There’s countless skeletal specimens lining the walls and shelves. While this just seems normal to the rest of us now, Azechi seems nervous. She shrinks back while drinking some of the tea gran brought out.

“After you finish your tea, I’ll bring you upstairs. That’s where my collection room is.” Sakurako-san is in a good mood today.

She’s being really social compared to usual. She wants to show us around before we’ve even finished our tea. I want to go see as soon as possible, too. I’ve hardly been to the second floor, and I haven’t gotten to see her collection room, either. I don’t know whether Azechi can tell how Sakurako-san and I feel, but she’s definitely taking her time with her tea. Still, as soon as her cup is empty, Sakurako-san grabs her hand without missing a beat.

The stairway to the second floor is lit by a gentle light in the entranceway. It feels kind of strange, like you've slipped back in time. After walking along the carpeted hall, we eventually reach the room on the opposite side from Sakurako-san's study.

"This is it."

Sakurako-san looks back at us with a proud grin before opening the door. If this were a manga, it would have had one of those "ta-da!" sound effects. Sakurako-san's specimen room is huge. It's probably over 10 tatami mats. There's racks, cardboard boxes, and plastic cases everywhere, along with countless bones I can't identify.

"UV rays are the natural enemy of bones, so the window is always closed."

"I see…"

The room is quite dark. If you don't turn on the lights, you'd need a flashlight to see anything. We all peek inside, except for Azechi. Sakurako-san quickly pushes us away.

"Huh?"

Then, with Azechi as the only one in the room, Sakurako-san closes the door and turns off the lights.

"Sakurako-san?!"

I hear a scream from behind the door.

"N-no! No!"

"Enjoy them as much as you'd like." Sakurako-san says nonchalantly, while leaning against the door.

Azechi pounds his fist against the door.

"Open the door! Open it! Let me out!"

She's locked in a pitch black room full of skeletons. Azechi keeps screaming.

"No, I'm scared! I hate this! Open the door! Let me out! Let me out of here!l

Her slams against the door keep getting louder. Sakurako-san doesn't move a muscle.

"Sakurako-san, Ranka is…" Kougami complains to Sakurako-san.

Azechi sounds even more scared with each shout.

"It's just dark. She's surrounded by the bones she loves so much." Sakurako-san laughs coldly.

"Maybe she's scared of the dark."

Imai sounds uneasy, too. Kougami closes her eyes and covers her ears, so he puts his hand on her shoulder. Eventually, the pounding on the door stops. I can hear a sound like she's sliding against the door, then a sniffling sound.. Azechi is sitting by the door, crying. Kougami pulls away from Imai and kneels by the door. She touches the wooden door, like she's trying to comfort Azechi through it.

"Ranka… I can't take this anymore… Please, just let her out." Kougami whispers. Her voice is wet with tears.

I can't stand this anymore, either.

"Sakurako-san, please open the door. I feel bad for Azechi."

"Why? I thought she liked bones and death?"

"No, I'm sure… She doesn't like that kind of thing at all."

Yeah, she probably hates it. She's scared of blood and death. She doesn't like bones. Sakurako-san sighs, then opens the door.

“Ranka!” Kougami hugs Azechi tight. “You’re okay. You’re fine, now…” Kougami rests her cheek on Azechi’s shoulder and rubs her back while she cries. “I’m sorry, you must have been scared…”

Eventually, Kougami starts crying, too. Imai gets flustered, and looks at me like he’s asking “what should we do?” as if I have any idea. Soon, Azechi’s crying turns into faint sniffles, and Sakurako-san approaches her.

“You bought that specimen, right? You didn’t make it.” She says in her usual, husky voice.

“How… did you know?”

“It’s easy to tell. It’s not even a dog.”

“Huh?”

“It’s similar to a dog. You probably bought it online thinking it was a dog, though I’m not sure if it was intentional or a mistake. Were you swindled?”

“Swindled?”

Sakurako-san snickers. I take out my phone.

“Yeah. Those are probably tanuki bones. They’re from the canine family, so they look similar. The bottom of the lower jaw is flat and straight, so it’s stable when placed on a flat surface. Tanuki skulls closely resemble those of primitive dogs. Since the shape of the skull varies depending on the breed of dog, I can’t say for sure. They have similar teeth, since they’re both canines, too. From my experience, I think it’s a tanuki, though.”

Sakurako-san grabs my phone.

“One more thing. A pet dog that died of old age would have more tartar on its teeth. When you take a good look at it, things don’t add up. Even if there’s a reason for the clean teeth, the extent of the wear doesn’t seem like that of an old dog.”

“Yeah, that’s it! It doesn’t feel like an elderly dog. It seems more youthful… and too clean overall.”

Sakurako-san smiles at me, and gives me my phone back.

“Therefore, you didn’t make that specimen yourself… correct? Azechi-kun?”

”...”

Azechi hangs her head and nods.

“Why did you lie about that?”

Kougami gently strokes Azechi’s hair with an unpleasant look on her face. Tears stream down Azechi’s cheeks as Kougami runs her fingers through her hair.

“...There’s two reasons. So people would avoid me, and to be different from how I used to be.”

“Different from before?”

“Yeah… I was nothing like this at all when I lived in Sapporo.”

Azechi slowly takes a deep breath. Her voice is still trembling with tears, but she lifts her head with resolve.

“I was too embarrassed to mention this before, but… I didn’t have any friends at my old school… I was bullied.”

“So you wanted to change yourself? But this is Asahikawa, not Sapporo. Basically nobody here knows you already. Besides, you stand out too much. Why bother making yourself stand out if you’re scared of being bullied again?” Sakurako-san shrugs.

“I thought… If I distanced myself from the start…”

“You’re being inconsistent. If you thought it through, you’d realize that doing something stupid like that would just end up leaving you isolated again. Your priorities are all wrong. From my perspective, you’re just trying to run away from your problems.”

“...”

Azechi finally stops trying to argue and looks to the floor.

“Ranka?”

Eventually, she starts to snicker.

“...Do you know about alt accounts?”

Kougami shakes her head no. We all look at each other in confusion, none of us know what she means. Of course, I don’t either.

“It’s short for alternate accounts. You can easily find out about it if you search it up on social media. Well, you guys don’t have anything to do with it, and it’s probably better if it stays that way. You don’t have to look it up or anything.” Azechi says in an almost self-deprecating tone. “I used to have friends at my old school at the start. My secrets were hidden. It’s something you can’t show other people. If you upload racy pictures to your hidden account, and tag it as a high school girl, you’ll start getting messages from people who are into that kind of thing. Then you start to get individual requests… They’re basically pictures you’d never want anyone to find out about.”

Ranka looks up at Sakurako-san, who is standing over her. Sakurako-san notices that Ranka is looking a bit scared, so she sits down next to Kougami.

“Please continue.”

“...Of course, I didn’t show my face, but sometimes… I posted parts of myself I really shouldn’t have shown other people. Sometimes I’d sell the pictures for digital currency. Of course, I never revealed my name or where I lived, so I figured it was a lot safer than compensated dating.”

I feel sick just listening to this. Imai and Kougami look uncomfortable, too. We all know where this story is going.

“There were three of us in my friend group - me, girl A, and girl B. My best friend, girl A, was popular in class. She was like the leader of the girls. Going against her basically meant you’d lose all your friends. Because of her, I fit in with the rest of the class.”

“In other words… she’s the one that bullied you?” I ask. Azechi gives a wry smile, and humbly nods.

“I was pathetic. Girl B and I were in a weak position in the class, though. So I guess ‘former best friend’ is more accurate. Speaking of Girl A, we took pictures together. Lots of naked, embarrassing pictures, making stupid poses. We did cosplay, too.”

She lets out another uncontrollable laugh. Worried, Sakurako-san puts a hand on her back and tells her to breathe slowly. Between the heat and the tears, Azechi’s black lipstick is starting to rub off, and her normal lip colour is peeking through.

“But one day… my mom found out. She was shocked and angry… Of course she was, her daughter had been taking pictures with her friend while doing weird things. That’s how our part-time job got found out. Although I call it a part time job, we didn’t get much money, ahaha.”

Contrary to her dry laughter, large tears spill out of Azechi’s eyes.

“I was a problem child, after all,” she says. Those words stab deep into my chest.

“Everyone found out. Even the school. Girl A and Girl B’s parents. We got suspended. I heard that some of the adults were arrested because of it. Girl A had been told about it by her older boyfriend.”

“Those people deserved to be arrested!” Kougami shouts angrily. She hugs Azechi tightly.

“Everything is all messed up now, and Girl A is mad at me because it’s my fault. She said I’m horrible, and I’d better prepare myself. And…”

Azechi pauses for a moment to sob.

“...And she uploaded my picture to the internet. Up until then, I’d always kept my face hidden.”

“No way…”

How cruel. Imai clenches his teeth. Even though Imai doesn’t normally get angry, what Azechi’s friend did is so cruel that even he’s trembling with rage. Sakurako-san gently strokes Azechi’s back while staring at her expressionlessly, but I’m sure on the inside she’s feeling angry and sad.

“The images were deemed inappropriate and taken down from the image sharing site pretty quickly, but it already had a lot of downloads. Even now there’s people out there with my pictures downloaded on their computers. I don’t know when or where I might meet someone who’s seen those pictures. I’m scared… but I can’t live the rest of my life like this…”

Does she have any other options? Anyone who betrays someone like that has no right being considered a friend. If she didn’t like it, why would she cooperate in the first place? I don’t want to make things worse by saying it, but I don’t think it’s right to sell nude pictures to strangers. Even if you don’t show your face. Not because of ethics or morals, but because it’s dangerous. It can lead to some serious trouble. Still, she shouldn’t be forced to suffer like this just because she didn’t think of the consequences. I truly do feel bad for Azechi. Even worse, I don’t know how to help her…

“After my suspension was over, I hung out in the infirmary all the time because I couldn’t bring myself to go back to class. My aunt invited me to live with her in Asahikawa because she couldn’t stand seeing how awkward my family was acting around me. Since I changed schools, I had a second chance. It was basically the perfect opportunity.”

So that’s why she doesn’t want to bother her aunt. She doesn’t want to cause any more strain on their relationship. That’s why she didn’t tell her aunt or parents about a potentially life threatening accident. I feel like I’m about to cry when I think about the injuries on her knees.

“I didn’t want anyone to recognize me from the internet, so I changed my clothes, hairstyle, and everything else. I’m not really interested in goth stuff, and I don’t like bones or corpses at all. I just don’t want people to hate me or look down on me, so I pushed all my problems aside. I was just scared, so I ended up hating everyone else.”

“So that’s why you started acting like that?”

Azechi nods. I’m starting to feel guilty about getting angry at her before. And now I’ve gone and made her confess all of this today.

“I thought that I didn’t need friends anymore, but maybe I was just scared. If I didn’t make any friends from the beginning, nothing bad would happen. I had no intention of becoming your friend, Kougami.”

“Then why did you?” Kougami suddenly raises her voice.

Azechi looks straight at her with an expression that looks like she's trying to hold back her pain.

"You didn't have any friends."

"What?"

"I was always just pretending to get along with my friends. You're the same, Yuriko. You don't like getting into fights and you don't want to be hated, so you just pretend to get along with everyone. You don't hate them, but you don't love your friends, right? I'm the same way, so I get it."

Kougami gulps. Her face is pale. She doesn't deny it. I'm shocked. Kougami is always surrounded by friends, and she seems like she's having fun, so I never thought about it.

"You pretend like you're thinking about the same things as everyone else, but on the inside you're not. Just pretending to have friends so you aren't hated. Pretending to be an honours student. You smile and laugh, but you're not actually having fun at all. When you change classes, you part ways with the friends you were always hanging out with."

"Things just haven't been going very well with Mana and Chika lately…"

"Three people makes a harsh balance, huh? One wrong move and you can easily end up alone. Those two aren't even wearing the same bear strap as you do anymore, Yuriko. You're the only one with it. They were laughing at you behind your back."

Kougami hangs her head. She pressed her lips tightly together.

"If you were smart, you would have made another female friend at the start, Yuriko Kougami-chan. But you were careless and went with the easier option. You gravitated toward those two. They're easygoing, and fun enough to be around. They needed you, and were important to them… until boys got involved."

Azechi looks and Imai and I. I don't know what's wrong with us.

"If you keep going like this, you'll end up isolated, Yuriko. No, rather than being isolated, you'll end up enduring much more suffering than that. Girls don't think well of someone who has fun hanging around with two boys. If they think of you as a rival, you'll be excluded. You'll end up being the class scapegoat for your remaining two years of high school," Azechi says, and puts her forehead against Kougami's. "...It feels like I can see your future. I don't want to have any friends anymore. If you became an enemy of the class, you'd understand how I felt, but I don't want that to happen to anyone else. I don't want to see you get hurt anymore."

"Ranka…"

"Being alone in a group of three is dangerous, but two and two is okay. So I'll be the stand in for Yuriko's friend. I'll be there so nobody hates you. It's going to be okay," Azechi says in a strong voice.

Azechi has been hurt so much, she should be in tatters. I've really been an idiot. I'm embarrassed that I've been disliking Azechi all this time like that.

"But… What that girl did to you was terrible. You shouldn't be friends with people who would treat you like that. You shouldn't even consider them your former friends."

Kougami clings to Azechi as she bursts into tears. They hold onto each other as they both cry.

"Oh dear… You don't usually need to worry too much about temperature and humidity with skeletons, but sudden changes like this can cause deterioration. At this rate, I'll need to pull out the dehumidifier."

Sakurako-san invites us the rest of us back to the living room, and gran prepares tea for each of us.

“That tanuki… I’d like to take it off her hands, if she doesn’t need it anymore. There aren’t many of them in Hokkaido, after all.”

I unintentionally spit out my tea.

“Was that your intention this whole time?!”

“What if it was?”

I scowl at her, but she looks pleased with herself. I thought it was strange for her to care about someone else like this. Gran comes back to the living room with a smile after bringing the two of them their tea. I can hear happy laughter from the second floor. For some reason, Hector tries his hardest to get Imai to throw a tennis ball for him, until Imai finally gives in and plays with him. After seeing everyone laughing and enjoying themselves, I thank Sakurako-san.

Final part

The cherry blossoms bloomed really early this year, since it’s been warmer than usual. There’s even places where they’ve already started falling. During these warm days of nice weather, I start my second year of high school. Even after confessing everything to the rest of us, Azechi still dresses like a goth loli. She’s developed an interest in occultism, and she still regularly fights with Imai. Still, she texts us, and hangs out with us after school. At school, she tries to act calm and composed, but she’s actually really talkative, and she laughs a lot. She’s also still really timid. I was visiting my grandpa in Nagayama one day, and she called me saying I had to stop by her house right away. When I got there, she was sitting on her bed screaming because there was a huge house centipede.

“Honestly… Girls are such a pain.”

The two woman army is going shopping, so since it’s been a while since it was just the two of us, Imai and I head to the bus stop together. Imai only says a few words.

“Yeah…”

Honestly, relationships between girls are too complicated for us to understand. It’s like some kind of cult with rigid, subdividing rules. It’s kind of scary.

“But, well… it looks like Kougami is having fun lately.”

Even after such a heavy discussion, those girls are enjoying their time in high school. I don’t think they’re just pretending to have fun. They hold hands like they’re dating, press their foreheads together, and talk to each other with secret words that only their friends know. As a boy, I’ll never understand.

“By the way, did you know Azechi does karate? And not just like fluttery, easy stuff. She kicks a sandbag at home and everything.”

“Hahaha… I definitely don’t want to get on her bad side.”

Even a girl like that was in a weak position in her old school. Maybe it has more to do with a person’s mind than their strength. Or maybe Azechi didn’t try to confront anyone with force. I feel like it’s probably the second one. Azechi really is a kind girl.

“...But it’s kind of lonely, huh?”

“Hm?”

“Azechi has been sticking to Kougami all the time lately. With her there, you can’t ever be alone with Kougami, right, Imai?”

Even though Imai is in love with Kougami, Azechi has been monopolizing her. I used to always try to casually leave the two of them alone together, but Azechi has been getting in the way of that. But when I grin at him, he frowns.

“Ah… so you…”

“Hm?”

Imai lets out a small sigh.

“You can stop that now. Sure, Kougami is… special to me. But when it’s just the two of us, I never know what to talk about. Besides, Kougami looks like she’s having the most fun when she’s talking to you,” Imai says, sounding deeply troubled.

Even though I’ve been going to all that trouble. I slap him on the back and tell him to get it together. He lets out a weak breath.

“Besides, I… I find it easier to just be with you. You’re the best, Shoutarou.”

“What’s this, are you confessing your love to me? But, well… I can’t deny that it’s more comfortable.”

I sort of agree. It’s fun to be with Sakurako-san and Kougami, but I can be the most carefree and relaxed when I’m with Imai.

“...So, Imai-kun, I have some movie tickets here that I got from miss Azechi. Want to go with me? It seems that miss Kougami didn’t want to go because she’s busy and it doesn’t look like something she’d like.”

When I show him the tickets, Imai gives me a thumbs up.

“What’s it called?”

“Let’s see… ‘Running People’ apparently. Is it a coming-of-age movie?”

But it’s rated R15. Maybe the male lead has some ulterior motives. However, the movie ended up being really thrilling. It was a horror movie, so of course Kougami refused, and Azechi didn’t even want to see it in the first place. People sure did run in it. They were escaping from zombies that could move quickly. They should have put a picture of a moving corpse on the poster so I could have avoided it.

Was this harassment? No, it was definitely harassment. I take back what I said. She isn’t kind at all. Ranka Azechi has an awful personality. I didn’t want to see a splatterfest! We were scared and had to fight the urge to yell while we watched it. Was this all part of Azechi’s scheme? Imai and I probably gained 1 or 2 bond points from huddling together in that movie theatre.

Second Bone: Calling For Baby Birds

Part 1

Spring in Asahikawa has started to explode. The snow has started to melt, and the ashen blanket covering the world has been blown away, revealing the green beneath it. Spring came especially quickly this year. After such a long winter, the Kujou residence's garden is still covered in snow. Even so, the daffodils, tulips, and lilies of the valley are in full bloom. In this lush garden, overflowing with the scent of spring, there's large bones beneath the soil.

It's the end of April, and the ends of the cherry blossom tree branches are turning red with buds. I'm going to visit the Kujou house. Before I can even ring the doorbell, Hector comes running across the yard with his tail wagging, and jumps on me.

"Hey! Hector!"

Gran picks up an apple as she scolds Hector. Hector seems to have been having fun playing in the dirt. His nose and feet are all muddy.

"Ahaha, it's fine."

I don't really mind if the clothes I'm wearing get stained with mud. Rather than worrying about my clothes, I'm more interested in the apple that gran's holding.

"Is there something wrong with that apple?"

"This apple is over ripe now, so I'm putting it out by the trees in the garden. Over the last few days, the bulbul chicks in the garden have been going wild." Gran says, looking up at the trees full of songbirds.

"Bulbuls… Are they the ones I can hear right now?"

"Yeah."

They're smaller than a crow, but larger than a sparrow, and covered in light brown feathers. I often see them hopping around in the rowan trees in winter. I never really thought about them as particularly cute, but gran beckons for me to follow her into the back garden.

"Wow… There's so many."

The wisteria trees are growing all around the storage shed, making the perfect spot for the tiny bird nest.

"Aren't they cute?" She says proudly, trying to keep her voice down.

There's three chicks in the nest, all snuggled up close to each other. They still don't have all their down, so you can still see some of their pink skin.

"The young lady says to leave them alone, but I just think they're the cutest."

The chicks don't seem frightened of our shadows being cast over them, but they start chirping at us. It looks like they're asking for food.

"Bulbuls aren't usually very afraid of people. I don't really agree with letting wild birds become accustomed to being fed by humans, though."

I turn around after suddenly hearing Sakurako-san's voice. She looks angrily at Hector's muddy paws.

"Isn't a bit of apple fine?"

"The adult birds can eat some apple, but they're busy raising their chicks, so they won't have time to peck at an apple out of curiosity. However, if you get too close, even bulbuls will get

scared. They may abandon the chicks and leave the nest behind, so leave them alone." Sakurako-san instructs us while holding Hector back.

Then, he stretches out his front paw. He keeps his paw up like he's doing "shake a paw," but extends it again to tap me. A dog punch. Hector seems a little angry and play bites Sakurako-san's arm. Gran and I laugh at how cute he is. He looks proud that he got all the attention on himself. He's so silly.

I stab a branch of the plum tree near the nest through the apple, then we move over to the front door so we don't get in the birds' way. The parent birds fly around the nest, making long, high pitched chirps.

"It's kind of unusual for a bird to make its nest so low down."

"You're right. I hope no cats go after it…"

Sakurako-san pretends to be uninterested, but I can tell she's also worried about the bulbul chicks.

"Well, less people let their cats outside these days, and there aren't many stray cats, so I think they'll be fine."

Gran starts pulling weeds out from between the cracks in the stone walkway, so I help her out.

"We can't let Hector go out in the yard too much for the next little while."

Sakurako-san sighs as Hector flops over by the entrance and shows his stomach. The white demon in question whips his tail back and forth like a broom, stirring up more and more dust as Sakurako-san pets him. It seems like bulbuls really aren't very afraid of people. As I pull one of the weeds up, a millipede pops out of the soil. One of the bulbuls quickly scoops it up before I can even react.

"Ah, so they look for food all day long."

"Yes, they take turns throughout the day. Bulbul couples are really close with each other. I often see them spending time together, even before they had chicks."

Gran says while she watches them. Before long, one bird makes a loud chirp, signalling that they're going to fly off again. She lets out a small sigh.

"...I know Naoe-sama is busy with work, but I wish he and the young lady would spend time together like that." She unintentionally verbalizes her thoughts.

"I don't think it's a problem. Naoe isn't going to run away or anything. He's the best partner for me, and I'm the best partner for him," Sakurako-san says.

"You sound pretty sure of that."

I can't help but laugh at how confident she sounds. Though I do know that they're well suited for each other.

"We're both just the right person in the right place for each other. I don't care about where he is or what he's doing. He doesn't want to be bothered. He's bound by rules of confidentiality. Being that man's wife means keeping national secrets."

As soon as gran apologizes for complaining about her, Sakurako-san heads inside. Hector stays behind. He's wagging his tail while he lays in the sun on the stone pavement.

"...They just need to submit some forms to get married, right? Is it more difficult than that?"

"For her, it is." Gran sighs again.

They both come from good families. I wonder if that causes problems for them to do it that way. I also understand why gran is worried. Rather, I'm worried that they'll just be fiancés forever. Not that I don't trust Ariwara-san, of course.

"The young lady might be scared." Gran mumbles to herself.

"Really?"

"I think she might be scared to get married and become a mother."

"...Ah."

Sakurako-san doesn't seem like the mom type. She seems more like a dad.

"For now, it's more convenient for both of them to leave their relationship like this. But I'm starting to feel lonely. I remember giving both of them milk when they were still babies. If I can, I'd love to hold her child."

She casts her gaze downward, looking lonely and worried. Hector stands up and rubs against her.

"Geez, you're too big, I can't hold you!" Gran says and rubs Hector's fluffy neck.

She seems to relax as Hector smiles and rubs himself against her hands.

The next day, I decide I can't resist how cute Hector and the bulbul family are, so I go to visit the Kujou residence again. After school as I pass by the old tree in front of the Nagayama library I hear the pair of bulbuls chirping.

"...?"

It's still far away, and different from how it sounded yesterday. While thinking about it, I suddenly get hit by something as soon as I open the front gate at Sakurako-san's house.

"Wah!"

As usual, Hector jumps on me as soon as I arrive. No, it's different from usual. He runs right past me.

"Ah, well, it'll be fine."

Fortunately he doesn't go out to the road, and goes right back to the yard.

"Hector got out into the yard."

Does he have to go to the washroom? Rather than worry about it, I'm more interested in the strange sound the bulbuls are making.

"Ah, you're finally here, boy."

Sakurako-san also seems more interested in the sound the bulbuls are making than Hector.

"The bulbuls are making quite the racket."

"They've been doing that since this morning."

"Ah! Hey!"

All of a sudden Hector is standing up with his front paws on the wisteria tree, looking into the nest.

"You can't do that! Hey! Hector!"

Is Hector also curious about the noise? I suddenly feel a chill and rush over to the nest.

"Sakurako-san!"

I immediately understand why they're making such a bizarre sound, and why Hector is so interested. Hector likes the scent of death. When I peer into the nest, there's three dead chicks.

"They're completely dead. Rigor mortis is setting in."

Sakurako-san picks one of the birds up with her pale hands. It's so, so small. I could close my hand around the whole chick.

"All three have broken cervical vertebrae. In other words, they suffocated due to a neck injury. There don't seem to be any other external injuries," she says in a monotone voice.

Today, I resent how delighted Hector looks as he stands by my feet.

"Were they attacked by a stray cat?"

"If that were the case, there would be other injuries. Claw marks, and such. These chicks don't have any, though. If it were a crow or something, they wouldn't have left the chicks here. Someone decided to murder these chicks."

"Murder…?"

"Yes, that's right. Crows only kill chicks to eat them. All these chicks were killed then left here."

Is that really what happened? I look at her, waiting for an answer. Sakurako-san lets out a deep sigh.

"So I think… a human broke their necks by hand."

"A… human?"

Gran comes out to the garden. Upon seeing the chicks, she leans against the wisteria tree and covers her mouth. She's trying to hold back her tears.

"...I thought they sounded weird this morning…" Gran whispers, holding one of the chicks in her hands.

She gently pets it with her finger. Sakurako-san gently picks it up and places it back in the nest.

"There's nothing we can do about it. They made their nest in a bad spot. The gate also should have been closed at night."

She puts her hand on gran's back and leads her back to the house.

"Good afternoon… Oh, did something happen?"

An older woman rings the doorbell.

"Shouji-san…" Gran says.

"Good afternoon. You should go check how Asada-san is doing. She needs you more than me."

"I already went there yesterday. Her complexion seemed to be looking better."

Asada-san is an older woman who lives nearby. She's prone to getting sick often. Shouji-san is the wife of the leader of the neighbourhood association, so she dropped by to deliver a newsletter. Gran quickly tries to hide her sadness from earlier. But it's too late, Shouji-san already noticed her gloomy expression from before.

"What happened?" She asks worriedly.

She looks a bit older than my mom. She's wearing a thick, brown apron, like the kind Shouko-san wears when she's gardening. She's overly friendly and likes to take care of people, but she also ends up being kind of meddlesome.

"Well…"

Shouji-san is supposed to be in charge of the community in the neighbourhood. Gran seems hesitant, but she explains about how the bulbul chicks were killed, and it was likely a person who did it.

“Then you mean someone entered your yard without permission? They might have thought it was an unclaimed plot of land, but there’s also been a lot of younger people around recently. Make sure you lock up tight at night from now on,” Shouji-san says, frowning.

“But it’s a good thing to have more young people around. They make the town more likely.”

“There’s too many young people jaywalking, eating convenience store food instead of cooking, sorting their garbage wrong, and not even saying hello when they see their neighbours. And now these rule breakers are starting to disturb the peace, too.”

She’s saying some pretty extreme things. However, it’s true that we have to be more careful. There was a time when it was fine to not worry about locking your door, but it’s dangerous now. Besides, there’s Hanabusa to worry about, as well.

“You should probably attach a motion sensor to the light by your front door. Get a security camera, too, if you can,” I say to Sakurako-san. She nods and says she was thinking about a camera as well.

“Until recently this was such a quiet little neighbourhood. The one who killed the chicks was probably the man who lives diagonally across the street. He stays in his house working all day, then rustles around in his garage until late at night.”

“I can’t see Houshou-san doing something like that...” Gran says with a bewildered expression.

“But crows and wild birds pollute the neighbourhood with their droppings, right? It’s too bad about what happened, but it’s a good thing that they’re gone. Well, anyway, be careful.” Shouji-san says, and walks away.

Shouji-san’s disturbing advice coupled with what happened to the bulbuls leaves gran with a terribly worn-out expression as she sits down on the front steps.

“Let’s make a plan. I’ll prepare a camera right away. Nao has also said before that there’s room for improvement for the security of the house. I’ve heard they’ve even installed a camera at the temple recently.”

“Alright, but…”

Gran shakes her head and says it’s not a big deal. Gran is sitting with her elbow on her thigh and her chin resting in her hand until Hector shoves his face through the gap between her arm and body and licks her face. I can’t tell if he’s trying to comfort her, or just acting spoiled. Probably both.

“What kind of person is Houshou-san?”

“Well… we haven’t spoken much. We don’t even really greet each other.”

The Houshou family moved into the house diagonally across the street from here last fall. They’re a young couple in their thirties with no children. That’s all gran knows.

“They’re renting, but it’s a relatively new, detached home, and they own their own car. They’re not in financial distress. It seems that he’s often home, but he’s probably working. If he’s up in the middle of the night often then he probably doesn’t have a consistent sleep schedule, so he likely isn’t a day trader or something like that. Maybe he’s a designer or something, so he makes his plans at home,” Sakurako-san adds.

She's observant as usual.

"And boy, you should also-" Sakurako-san starts to say, but she notices something and pauses. "Ah."

She's looking at a man who is standing in front of the garbage pickup area in front of the temple, holding a convenience store bag.

"Gran?"

As soon as gran notices him, she stands up and walks towards him.

"Houshou-san?" Gran says with a bow.

That's the person who lives across from the Kujos. I guess this guy is Houshou-san. He looks confused and stops walking, then bows back to gran. His curly hair is kept neat, unlike Utsumi-san's, and he has frameless glasses. He's wearing a simple striped shirt and slacks. He has a thin build, and he's about a head taller than me.

"Um… Were you out buying dinner?" Gran timidly tries to start a conversation with him.

"It doesn't matter to you," Houshou-san says bluntly, then he starts walking away.

"But if you always eat like that, you won't get proper nutrition. If you don't take care of yourself while you're young, it'll cause problems when you get old."

"I'm the only one who should be thinking about my diet."

There's no reason for him to talk back like that. Houshou-san walks back to his own house with a grim expression.

"You're right, but… Last night I made too much dinner, so would you like some? I made bamboo shoots and herring in miso."

"Please stop bothering me!"

Gran desperately tries to make conversation with him, but he just gets angry and slams the door in her face.

"Gran!"

Her shoulders droop in disappointment.

"Just leave him alone. That's what he says he wants, after all." Sakurako-san says bluntly. She calls Hector back into the house.

Hector starts to follow Sakurako-san, but then he looks worried about if he should comfort gran instead.

"But I just wanted to be able to talk to him a bit, at least…"

We're alone now, so I greet gran when she comes back. Is she suddenly trying to be kind to Houshou-san because of what Shouji-san said earlier? Apparently she guessed what I'm thinking, because gran shakes her head.

"I don't want to think badly about people I don't know."

So she just wants to know more about him. At first glance he certainly doesn't seem like the kind of person who would kill a bird. I pat Hector's head as I go to open the door for him, but I feel like someone is watching me for a moment. I lift my head and look at the thick curtains at Houshou-san's house, and shiver a bit. However, even after watching for a minute, the curtains remain shut. The Houshou house doesn't open again as it sinks into dusk. The only sound is the cries of the bulbuls. Their heartrending cries calling out for their chicks continue relentlessly.

Part 2

Gran invited me to stay for dinner, but the mood seems awkward somehow, so I'm just heading home.

"Welcome back. I'm tired today so let's eat out. What do you want?"

My mom greets me with a smile. She's studying to be qualified as a home inspector right now.

"There's a good conveyor belt sushi place near the bridge."

"Nice, I was thinking the same thing." She nods, smiling from ear to ear.

I thought for sure she'd say no, but I guess she's in the mood for it. It's probably because there was a feature on a fantastic conveyor belt sushi place on TV last night. We climb into the car and head off right away so we can get there before it's too busy. It's times like this when I really feel the bond between parents and their children. I definitely inherited my gluttony from my mom.

Fortunately, there's only two of us, so we don't have to wait long to get a seat at the counter. Conveyor belt sushi is popular here, so if you don't know what you're doing, you might end up needing to wait an hour or two before you can get in.

"Woah… they even have convenience store lunches."

I casually mention that I heard on TV yesterday that it's harder to gain weight if you eat some pickled ginger first. My mom immediately puts it into practice. Since I'm forbidden from going to the Kujo house, I lie and tell her I was hanging out with a friend.

"I wonder if they're any good."

"I dunno. It's better both health-wise and financially to make your own food, anyway."

I often end up at the convenience store during lunch at school, but 500 yen disappears fast. Convenience store lunches are definitely more expensive than healthier alternatives.

"But isn't it easier to just buy lunch? Convenience stores have recently started making healthier options, too. If it was just me on a day like today, I'd probably just have some rice and pickled vegetables." My mom says.

She takes a plate with kappa maki with wasabi off the conveyor belt. Her voice starts trembling while she's still in the middle of talking. The wasabi must have been too spicy for her.

"You have a point. I feel like if I lived alone, I'd just eat instant noodles and omelet rice every day."

"I know, right?"

It might get expensive, but it seems like such a pain to go buy groceries all the time. If it'll all cost the same amount, I'd rather have something filling. A plate with a beautiful pink piece of fatty tuna on it catches my eye, but I decide to take the plate of minced tuna instead. Lean tuna is good, too.

"I remember when I was younger, they used to say that as long as you cook your own food, the nutritional balance would be fine… Apparently keeping it balanced is important when you cook for a small group of people, like a family. It's hard nowadays when it costs so much to buy ingredients, and people work so much that there's no time to cook. I don't want to stress out about my food that much, though."

You have to cook, eat, then clean… But I guess you can't just live off eating only rice. Maybe it's easier if you have someone else to split the chores with.

“The food industry is always changing, along with the way families look. It feels kind of like you’ve been left behind when suddenly people are saying that it’s bad if you don’t cook for yourself every day. Isn’t the most important part to eat food that you enjoy?” My mom says.

She proved her own point yesterday when she picked up a high calorie soused mackerel. I agree, though. I like eating tasty things the best.

“...Mom, you don’t need to overthink it so much. I’ll eat anything, after all.”

“If we ate what you wanted every night, we’d be bankrupt in no time. Besides… I don’t even know how many more years you’ll still be living at home. Shouldn’t I try to cook for you as much as I can? Well, it’s good to eat out sometimes, too.”

The warship sushi, shrimp head soup, and pumpkin dango with minced tuna arrive at the table one after another. I smile at my mom, and she smiles back.

She keeps giving me the soused mackerel, saying it’s too high in calories for her.

“I’ll make dinner tomorrow, then.”

“You can only make curry, spaghetti, and omelette rice, though.”

“I can make buttered corn, too! There’s more to it than just opening up the can and putting butter on it!”

I try to argue saying that you have to use the right amount of butter, and there’s the part where you put oil on at the end, but she keeps objecting. We both laugh as we argue about it. I wonder how Sakurako-san and gran are spending their dinner time right now. I heard that Houshou-san also lives with his wife. I wonder what kind of expression he has while talking to his wife right now?

The next day, I head to Sakurako-san’s house in the morning. I’m worried about what happened with Houshou-san and the bulbuls, but I’m also worried that gran is still feeling down, plus I want to see Hector. As I approach the house, I can hear the sad cries of the bulbuls resounding. Are they grieving their deceased chicks? They sound so sad.

“They’re searching for their chicks.”

Once I arrive at the Kujou house, Sakurako-san starts telling me about the birds.

“Searching for them? Where are they?” I ask, but I have a feeling I already know the answer.

“I’m turning them into specimens, of course.”

“...”

I grimace. It was a dumb question to ask someone like Sakurako-san.

“What’s with that face? Well, whatever. I did an autopsy on one of them yesterday. As I thought, their neck was broken.”

“Did someone really do that to them?”

“Isn’t it a specialty of humans to steal the lives of others for no good reason?”

I can’t argue after how many corpses I’ve encountered with Sakurako-san. Animals kill in order to eat, but humans are different.

“...Hector, go.”

As soon as I see Hector with his leash, wagging his tail, all my gloomy feelings are blown away. For the past few days everyone has been focusing on the bulbuls, so he’s been sulking about it. He seems to be harbouring a lot of jealousy behind that cute face.

“If you’re going for a walk, can you run an errand for me, young master?”

“An errand? Sure.”

“What should we have for lunch? I know, how about that ginger pork you love. Please buy some meat.”

“Heheheh, alright!”

But recently it’s been frowned upon to tie dogs up in front of the supermarket because they can cause trouble for others. But Hector is so cute. I couldn’t live with myself if he got kidnapped. I decide to go shopping on my bike first. Once Hector realizes he’s not coming with me he looks at me like he’s thinking “What? Are you serious?!” with a surprised expression. I walk by and pretend not to notice. He sulks about it as he waits by the door while I leave. I hop on my bianchi and rush away from the Kujou house.

“...Ah.”

I notice that the garage door is open at Houshou-san’s house. When I ride past I see him in the garage, fiddling with a mountain bike. I park my bike. I catch sight of the white frame and logo that says “GIANT”.

“Woah! It’s a Rabobank model!” I accidentally say out loud. Houshou-san turns around and looks at me surprised.

“Oh, you’re from across the street…”

“Hello.”

Houshou-san bows his head now that he’s noticed me. I return his greeting. He notices my bianchi and pushes his bike out of the garage, seeming a little embarrassed.

“That’s a Rabobank, right? I’m pretty sure it’s, um… A 2010 model?”

“It’s a replica model so it’s not as expensive.”

The model professionals use costs about 700 000-800 000 yen. The replica is cheaper, but it still doesn’t go for less than 200 000. Rabobank has its own professional cycling road race called LottoNL-Jumbo. But until 2012 the team name was the name of the bank.

“Do you like Jumbo?”

“My favourite is Vacansoleil. The orange jersey is really cool though, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s why I ride a Bianchi.”

Vacansoleil-DCM, the team I cheer for, uses Bianchi bikes. Even though we didn’t really get along yesterday, we’re managing to have a little, slightly awkward conversation about bikes now. Cycling road races are driven recklessly and tactically with each member of the team playing an important role. It’s different from the F1 or other car races, there’s a real thrill to the fact that the people need to actually pedal. We somehow end up standing around and talking for 10 minutes. I notice that his shirt is a cycling jersey, but he’s not wearing cycling shorts.

“...Oh, sorry. You were trying to head out somewhere, weren’t you.”

“Yeah… It’s my routine to go out and do whatever I want for two hours on my days off.”

“Only two hours?”

“My wife is ill and can’t leave the house very much, so it feels wrong to go out alone. I’m self-employed, so I stay home most of the time. It’s suffocating to stay inside all the time, so I try to leave the house once a week.”

I feel bad about taking up his precious free time.

“Up until last year, we lived further North, so I don’t know my way around the suburbs of Asahikawa yet. Could you show me a good spot to go biking sometime?”

“How about we go biking next time I’m in the area? I went to Takikawa the other day, but it might be a little too far for a 2 hour round trip…”

I have to go finish my errand. What if I take too long and Hector decides he doesn’t want to play with me anymore? I turn to stay heading down the road, but I notice Shouji-san is now standing in front of Houshou-san.

“Houshou-san! Are you not going to participate in picking up trash or tending the flowerbed in the neighbourhood again?l

“Huh?”

Houshou-san and I are both surprised by her anger.

“Maybe you have some reason you can’t. If you do, I’m not going to force you to tell me, but honestly… You always avoid doing any work, don’t you?”

“...I never heard about it.”

Houshou-san’s answers with a stern expression.

“You mean you forgot?! Are you serious?!”

Shouji-san grows even angrier upon seeing Houshou-san’s irritated expression. I can understand why he’s frustrated, since Shouji-san won’t let him explain his side of the story.

“It’s not that I-“

“Th-That’s right! He had something to do, so I agreed to go in his stead!”

I step between them to keep them from arguing.

“Huh?”

“Geez, you’re so forgetful. But that’s why I came here today, so it’s fine now. I’ve got lots of energy to spare!”

Houshou-san gives me a puzzled look, but I ignore him and turn to Shouji-san.

“He has something to do that he can’t back out of, so I’m participating for him. It’s not a problem, is it?”

“N-no… but…” Shouji-san looks just as confused as Houshou-san.

Even I don't know why I’m doing all this.

“Is something wrong, young master?” Gran notices me and calls out to me.

“You’re from Kujo-san’s place…”

I guess she remembers me from yesterday.

“Then why…”

Shouji-san is about to say something, but someone else from the neighbourhood calls her over, so she rushes off.

“You…” Houshou-san looks at me curiously.

“You should get going now.”

“But…”

“If I back out and you go instead, they’ll think something’s off. Please just enjoy your break. In return, how about we go biking somewhere and get ice cream sometime?”

“...Thank you.”

He can’t be a bad person if he likes bikes. It’s selfish, but I wasn’t to believe that. I send Houshou-san off with a smile. Gran wants to get closer to him, too. I’m still upset about the bulbul chicks, but seeing Houshou-san working on his bike in his nice, clean garage, and his perfectly ironed shirt from yesterday makes me think he’s a tidy person. He couldn’t possibly be bad. Killing a living creature is a terrible thing. Death is dirty. Humans instinctively hate death,

and embrace life. He couldn't possibly be someone who breaks into someone else's yard just to kill baby birds.

Part 3

Even though I feel guilty about leaving Hector behind, I help out the neighbourhood association. It's pretty awkward to just join in with a group of people I don't know. Gran and I are in charge of picking up trash on the side of the road and in the park where it was trapped by the snow before.

"Still, I wonder if they're blood related?"

"No, I think he's an acquaintance of Kujo-san…"

"But if he's not going to do it, he should at least have his wife participate."

"His wife is sick. I've only seen her once, but she was pale as a ghost."

All the wives of the neighbourhood are gathered around, whispering to each other. It reminds me of the way the girls in my class whisper and giggle with each other. I absentmindedly think about how women don't really change as they age. I can't tell whether gran has noticed them or not. They're making me a little angry, though.

However, it makes me realize that Houshou-san isn't just disliked by Shouji-san, but by everyone in the neighbourhood. Yesterday he seemed nervous and uncomfortable, but today I can see that he's a kind, serious person who is willing to give up his own fun for the sake of his wife. It's uninteresting to me, so I stay silent and keep working.

The nice weather is the only redeeming quality. Sweat slowly starts to form on my back. Biking today would feel so nice. At least Houshou-san is enjoying it. After about an hour we finally finish, and the group dissolves.

After I return to Sakurako-san's house, I wake up Hector and we play until lunch is ready. Hector seems angry at me, and isn't willing to forgive me for one toy. I bring over balls, stuffed animals, ropes, and squeaky hamburgers one after another. I keep trying even after lunch, but he still doesn't want anything to do with me until he sees Sakurako-san take out the pig ear treats. I can't help but think that pets really do resemble their owners when I see him get stubborn like that.

"...What's wrong?" Sakurako-san notices that I'm staring into space, and smiles at me.

While I'm talking to gran about having potato mochi for a 3 o'clock snack, the doorbell rings. Gran heads over to answer right away, but Hector chases after her like he's saying "I'll go, too!"

"Young master, it's the man from across the street," Gran calls out to me.

I thought it'd be Houshou-san.

"Oh, welcome back. Did you have fun?"

"Yeah, thank you. Here, I got you a small gift."

He smiles awkwardly and holds out a bag from a popular cake shop that has a bear logo on it.

"Aw, you didn't have to do that."

"Oh my, we were just talking about having an afternoon snack. Would you like some tea?"

Gran invites Houshou-san in before he can escape.

“Um… Well, just for a bit.”

I can tell he isn’t really thrilled about the invitation. I guess he thinks I’d be upset if he refused. He stays near me, and accepts the invitation. Houshou-san offers some macarons to gran as a gift for her hospitality. We have the macarons with some of gran’s homemade simmered beans and tea. The simmered beans and tea go together surprisingly well.

“Huh? They’re not your grandchildren?”

Houshou-san seems to have thought that Sakurako-san and I were gran’s grandchildren. He seems surprised to learn that none of us are related.

“They’re my acquaintances.”

“I really thought all of you were a family.”

Sakurako-san and gran aren’t related by blood. Of course, I’m not related to them, either. And the same goes for Hector, who is curled up by my feet. Even so, we can still have fun sitting around talking and eating like this together.

“It feels strange to hear someone say that.” Gran says happily.

“Even though we live so close, we didn’t know anything about each other. All I knew was that gran was always inviting me for tea.”

As you’d expect from gran. Houshou-san smiles, but suddenly looks like he remembered something.

“...I’m truly sorry for how impolite I was the other day.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry for being impolite, too. Make sure I don’t forget to give you some leftovers before you go today.”

“Bring your wife next time she’s feeling up to it,” gran adds.

Houshou-san looks sad all of a sudden.

“What’s she sick with?” Sakurako-san asks, despite how rude it is, while she reaches for a pink macaron.

“...Before moving here, we lived in a small town further north, but we couldn’t get used to living in such a close-knit place. My wife is extremely nervous in social situations, so she rarely leaves the house. When she’s forced to leave, she starts hyperventilating and collapses.”

“So in other words, it’s an anxiety disorder?”

Houshou-san nods.

“So I thought if we moved to a bigger city, it would be easier to befriend some people, and the change of scenery might help, but…” Houshou-san says, shaking his head. “Oh, but I’m grateful to you, Kujo-san.”

“But she’ll have to deal with other people at some point. People can’t live all by themselves. If something happened, it would be hard on both of you. They say a meeting by chance is preordained. We live nearby, so don’t hesitate to come see us if something is troubling you. Right, young lady?”

Gran looks at Sakurako-san, but she just shrugs in response. I like to think she’s fond of the idea.

“Thank you very much. I find that the neighbourhood association here gives me a bad feeling. I’ve come home to find my garbage bags I put out were placed by my front door, and someone has put garbage in my mailbox before.”

“In your mailbox?”

Who would do that? I suddenly remember the people I heard gossiping from the neighbourhood. Still, they didn't seem like the kind of people who would do something like that.

"Yes. I also truly didn't hear anything about the flower bed maintenance. Nobody ever came to tell me."

Gran looks puzzled.

"There was a circular notice about the flower bed cleanup. Did it never get to you?"

"I think we've only gotten a circular notice once since we moved here."

"Huh?" Gran and I both look at each other.

Sakurako-san is unfazed as usual.

"That's weird… When it came around yesterday, it looked like you'd already signed it."

Gran assures us that his name was already marked off.

"...How about we check?" Sakurako-san says while she puts her cup on the table. "I'd like to say that it has nothing to do with me, but those macarons were very delicious. I'd like to thank you."

Gran stares at her for a moment. She's probably thinking that she has a bad habit of doing things like this. Sakurako-san is reliable, though. Hector clings to us, not wanting to be left behind again. I set out to see who's responsible with Sakurako-san.

Part 4

Our destination is Asada-san's house, Houshou-san's neighbour. The Houshou and Tatebayashi family's houses face the temple and Asada-san's house. The circular notice should go from the Asada house to the Kujou house.

"Good evening, Asada-san."

Gran, Sakurako-san, Houshou-san, and I all visit the Asada house. Asada-san is an old woman who is turning 87 this year, and doesn't seem to be doing well health-wise recently.

"Ah!"

Asada-san slowly opens the door, her body heavy from her illness. As soon as she sees us- no, as soon as she sees Houshou-san, she looks clearly upset, and tries to close the door.

"We'd like to ask you about the circular notices."

Sakurako-san is faster than her. She shoves her foot in the gap where the door is open, preventing Asada-san from closing it.

"I… didn't…"

"Like I said, we just wanted to ask something? It's not a hard question, okay?"

"I didn't…"

Houshou-san touches the door, seeming unable to just watch their dispute.

"The circular notices haven't been coming around to my house. I just wanted to check with you. Has it been coming around to your place?"

"That's…" Asada-san mumbles.

"If you haven't been getting them either, I'll go to Tatebayashi-san's house. We're supposed to be stamping the notices to confirm we've seen them. If you haven't seen them, it's a big problem," Houshou-san says. Asada-san hurriedly opens the door.

"Don't go to Tatebayashi-san's house."

Asada-san is clearly trembling. Sakurako-san narrows her eyes.

“Why? Is the Tatebayashi family the offender?”

“...No, but Tatebayashi-san’s husband died 3 months ago, so it’s a difficult time. I want to approach her as softly as possible.”

“I see… But what does that have to do with the circular notice?” Gran asks Asada-san. Gran looks sad, but not convinced.

“...”

“Asada-san?”

“...Tatebayashi-san and I did it because we were told to.”

When Houshou-san urges her, Asada-san finally lets it out, as if she’s given up.

“I don’t have any kind of grudge against you, I didn’t have a choice.”

Asada-san tries to keep her voice down, and shakily holds Houshou-san’s hands.

“Why did you do that? Who told you to?!”

Asada-san hesitates to answer.

“Was it Ms.Shouji?"

“Ah…” Asada-san’s voice trembles.

“...Why would she do that?”

“People tend to think of the elderly, like you, as people one should follow. They’re weak, and need someone to help them. Right now, she’s taking care of both you and Tatebayashi.”

Asada-san’s face turns pale. She looks like she’s not feeling well. Gran and I try to help her, but Houshou-san gently grabs her shoulder first. She seems taken aback.

“...I couldn’t refuse Ms. Shouji. She’s done so much to help me over the years, like shovelling my snow in the winter. The same goes for Tatebayashi-san. Especially in the past 6 months when her husband fell ill and she dealt with the funeral, Ms. Shouji helped her a lot.”

Asada-san squeezes Houshou-san’s hand. Tears start to roll down her cheeks.

“I’m truly sorry. She told me to put garbage by your door when you went out. She said that if you and your wife weren’t going to follow the rules, she’d have to protect the neighbourhood herself.”

That’s terrible! Houshou-san squeezes Asada-san’s hand back.

“I understand. Thank you for telling me,” he says.

He keeps his expression neutral without showing any anger until we leave Asada-san’s house. I can understand why he’s so mad. As soon as the door closes, he immediately starts walking.

“Where are you going?”

“The president of the neighbourhood association’s house!”

“Calm down. If you do that, you’re doing just what they want.”

“...”

Houshou-san bites his lip after Sakurako-san’s warning. But that doesn’t mean we can just leave things like this. He squeezes his fists until his knuckles turn white.

“Don’t worry, I know what to do. You can just wait at your house.”

Sakurako-san gently grabs Houshou-san’s hand and shows him a fearless grin.

“I don’t like this, either. The area around here used to belong to my grandfather, so while she isn’t hostile towards me, she isn’t exactly my biggest fan. I wouldn’t care if it was just

spreading rumours, but she's gone too far. She also killed the bulbul chicks in my garden. You reap what you sow, after all… Hey, Ume."

Gran looks over quickly after being called by name.

"You come, too. Let's put a stop to this foolishness together."

"As you wish, young lady."

Sakurako-san starts walking away, her black hair fluttering in the wind. Watching the way she walks, you can tell that she's a high-class lady. Gran follows close behind her. You can tell her age is starting to wear on her by the way she walks. Sakurako-san strolls down the street with a particular elegance that I can't put into words. She feels so far away, like she lives in a completely different world from me.

Naturally, when she asks Ms. Shouji about the circular notice, she denies it.

"What are you trying to say? This is ridiculous… I've had no part in this." She bluntly denied everything Sakurako-san says.

Of course she would. It's not going to be easy to get her to admit to it.

"But the truth is…"

"Ozawa-san, I'm disappointed in you. I guess you've been influenced by the Kujo family. There's no proof of any of this, after all." Shouji-san says to gran.

Gran's expression completely changes when she mentions the name "Kujo." She's not embarrassed. She's angry.

"Ume, stand down." Sakurako-san puts her palm in front of gran to hold her back. "You want proof? Then let's go see it."

"Huh?"

"The garbage collection area faces the temple. They must have a security camera or two over there."

"C… Camera?" Shouji-san's face turns pale.

"Why do you look shocked? If you haven't done anything wrong, there shouldn't be a problem." Sakurako-san looks satisfied with herself.

"But this has nothing to do with you…"

"It's a problem to have other people going through someone else's trash. If you're accused of causing other people emotional or mental stress, you won't be able to argue against it. Besides that, moving someone else's garbage from the collection area can be seen as theft in some cases."

Shouji-san gasps in surprise, then angrily strikes the shoe box.

"Why are you accusing me?!"

"You know the contents of the Houshou family's garbage. If you don't check inside, you don't know what's been thrown away, right?"

Shouji-san is at a loss for words. Sakurako-san lets out a bored sigh.

"But those people aren't following the rules! They're always sneaking around and not greeting people!"

"You won't be forgiven just because you're elderly. First of all, this isn't just a warning. This is rejection, exclusion, and harassment. What you're doing lacks any kind of class or dignity!" Sakurako-san raises her voice, finally frustrated about not getting through.

Shouji-san trembles with anger, and her lips quiver as she tries to find the words to argue.

“Just stop already, Shouji-san. It’s just as the young lady says. This isn’t the right way to do things.”

Before the two of them can continue their argument, gran stands up to Shouji-san with her small body.

“I… I…”

“I understand how much you value morals, and want to keep the neighbourhood in good shape, but older people are supposed to watch over younger people and teach them! It’s as natural as flying is for birds!” Gran roars at Shouji-san in a voice that I can’t believe came out of such a compact body.

Sakurako-san nods. Sakurako-san knows what it’s like to be scolded by gran. She’s scary when she’s mad. Finally, Shouji-san drops to her knees and admits to what she did. The garbage incident, the circular notice, and spreading rumours. Apparently she wasn’t only targeting the Houshou couple, but several other young people in the neighbourhood. Shouji-san swears that she’ll change her ways.

“Why did you kill the bulbuls?” Sakurako-san asks.

“Huh?”

“The birds in my garden. That was your handiwork, was it not?”

Shouji-san seems like she truly has no idea what we’re talking about at first, until she finally remembers when we told her before about the chicks.

“Wild birds are… disgusting. I would never touch one. It wasn’t me.” She shakes her head.

Sakurako-san puts her head in her hands and says she must have made a mistake.

“That’s true… Unless there’s special circumstances, it’s not easy to run away from the guilt of taking a life.”

She turns to look at me.

“Let’s go.”

“Huh? Sakurako-san?”

Where is she going? She never answers me when I ask that. She’s wearing a tight, white skirt. I follow her out of Shouji-san’s house.

“I see…”

Standing in the entrance of the Houshou family’s house, Shouji-san apologizes. Houshou-san lets out a deep, long sigh.

“You may not think it’s enough, but please accept my apology.”

Certainly, after all she’s done, people are still going to talk badly about him. This community is absurd. It seems kind of similar to a high school class. People are still the same even if they’ve grown up, I guess.

“...By the way, I have something to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“It’s about your wife.”

“What about her?” Houshou-san looks a bit confused by the sudden question.

I slowly look back at the living room door. His wife is standing there… I ask if we should talk outside. She waves her hand, declining.

"...The bulbuls' cries can be heard from really far away. Sometimes when they'd sing, your wife would peek through the curtains."

"Yuu does that?"

"...Ah."

I remember feeling someone looking at me when I was outside in the evening. It thought it must have been from the Houshou house's living room. I thought it was Houshou-san looking, but I guess not. In that case, I guess she was looking at the bulbuls, not me.

"At first I thought she loved bulbuls like gran does."

"Love them? I don't know about that. She probably just thought they were noisy…" Houshou-san says with a stiff expression.

"...That's right." Sakurako-san nods, then takes off her shoes and strikes the door to the living room.

"Kujo-san!"

"Can you hear me? It's a crime to kill wild birds like bulbuls. You can be punished for trespassing, as well as violating the Wildlife Management and Control Act! Do you understand?! You are a criminal!"

"Kujo-san! Please stop!"

Houshou-san tries to calm Sakurako-san down in a panic. However, Sakurako-san ignores him, and continues to slam on the door. Over and over again. She won't stop. Eventually, a shrill scream can be heard from the other side.

"Stop it!"

"No! Why did you kill them?!"

"They're so free, always having fun… I hate it! Of course I'd get mad with them making so much noise! What's wrong with killing them?!"

"Because they're free… Are you serious? That's why you killed the chicks?" Houshou-san says in a shaky voice.

He can hardly believe it. He falls to his knees in disbelief.

"...I couldn't forgive them for being happier than me, a human being. The birds could live freely and have a family, but I spend every day alone in the house. I wish I had wings like they do."

"Alone? What about me?"

"You didn't protect me. Even though I was struggling, you wouldn't listen to me. All you care about is your work and yourself! I mean less to you than a bird! Even if we're together, your heart is somewhere else! I don't have a real family!"

Houshou-san holds his head. He doesn't want to hear this.

"But…"

He always thought he was sacrificing his own happiness for her. He tried to devote himself to his wife by giving up his hobbies, and going to the store despite all the stares and nasty looks he got.

Gran buries her face in her hands upon hearing her confession.

"Anyway, that's why I killed them! You look like an idiot, crying over some birds and looking for who did it."

The sound of laughter seeps out from behind the door. I close my eyes in an attempt to avoid the reality of the situation. I wonder if she's gone mad, being stuck inside that room.

Final part

Sakurako-san reported Houshou-san's wife.

"Don't you feel bad for her?" Gran asks with a grim expression.

"That's a completely different matter. Even if she's pathetic, I can't forgive her for what she did. Life is something that should be protected, not stolen." Sakurako-san says flatly.

She also advised Houshou-san to seek proper medical treatment for his wife's condition. It's not good for either of them to leave things the way they are. Houshou-san expressed that he's worried about whether he can properly support his wife anymore. I heard him mumbling, "how could this have happened?" but unfortunately, nobody can answer that.

"The bulbuls left the nest… Earlier than I expected." Gran mumbles to herself while she looks out at the garden.

Even though the bulbuls left, I still feel like I can hear their sad song.

"For some reason, I'm reminded of the lady of the house…" Gran whispers, looking into the empty bird's nest.

"You mean Sakurako-san's mom?"

Gran slowly nods. I notice a tear rolling down her cheek.

"...Nadeshiko-sama was also a very pitiable young lady. A lot of things didn't go right for her. Kaoruko-sama was a carefree person, like Sakurako, but… Nadeshiko-sama was quite the opposite."

Gran looks up at the cherry blossom trees in the yard.

"Gran?"

Before she can finish her story, Hector gets in the way.

"Sawa-san is on the phone." Sakurako-san says as she walks up from behind us.

Gran quickly wipes away her tears and heads into the house like always. She reminds me of the two bulbuls when they were crying, looking for their chicks. Eventually, they stopped looking.

"...Those birds had many failed attempts at breeding. Though they lost their chicks, the breeding season is long. Maybe they'll have more."

"But the new chicks aren't the same as their old ones." I reply, looking up at the same tree gran was staring at.

It seems like the bulbuls have gone somewhere far away. The garden is silent once again. Somehow, the silence causes a deep discomfort to seep into my chest.

Third Bone: Ecdysis

Asahikawa is a big city, in its own way. Of course if you compared it to the largest cities on the Honshu island, you'd be laughed at for saying there's 3 Starbucks here. If you go downtown, you can find most things. However, when it comes to shopping, you have to go to Sapporo.

I'm looking for a waterproof backpack for when I go biking. Last year when I was on my way back from biking around Biei, it suddenly started raining really heavily, and my phone got soaked. In order to enjoy cross biking even more this year, I'd like to get some new clothes and other stuff if my budget allows for it.

While casually talking to Sakurako-san about it, she asks if I'd like to go to Sapporo on the weekend with her. She's heading there to visit the hospital her uncle is at. She says it's okay if I'm with her when she visits now. I guess since I've already visited him on my own before. That's why I'm with Sakurako-san in Sapporo on a weekend in the second half of May.

We arrived in Sapporo just before 10am, and did our shopping in the morning. Then we had an early lunch with Ariwara-san who said he'd be heading overseas after. We go to Ariwara-san's favourite steak specialty store where we share 200g of Ikeda beef and Kamifurano wagyu steak. Kamifurano wagyu beef is fatty and melts in your mouth, while Ikeda beef is quite lean and has a rich flavour. Despite their differences, both are irresistibly delicious. Sakurako-san doesn't like meat, and she doesn't usually eat much, so she only eats about a third of her omu-hayashi rice before passing the rest to me. I was worried she'd be hungry later, but apparently she ate two pieces of cake while I was shopping earlier. She emphasizes that it's a secret from gran, but I don't know if I can follow through with that. I just can't bring myself to disobey gran like that.

After enjoying Sapporo for a while, we part with Ariwara-san and head off to visit Sakurako-san's uncle. This is my second time visiting him in the hospital. Sakurako-san brings her usual roses for our visit. The hospital room is pure white and full of machines, with a middle aged man laying in the middle of it all. His hair is already completely grey, making him look older than he is. He isn't even 50 yet. At first glance, my heart feels heavy with pity, but my anxiety disappears when I look into his eyes.

"Hey, good to see you again."

I wonder why the robotic voice coming from one of the machines sounds so friendly. I can see the corners of his mouth curl a bit, so I smile back. He's been stuck in bed for 10 years, but his heart hasn't given in to his illness. It's like… His curiosity and desire for the truth are still alive and well.

"Your complexion looks good today, Masamichi-san." Sakurako-san says happily.

She has an expression I've never seen on her before. Masamichi-san, or Masamichi Shitara, is Sakurako-san's uncle's name. Sakurako-san usually just calls him "my uncle," but she calls him by name when she sees him. And yet she just calls me "boy." Seeing how close the two of them are makes my heart hurt. I wonder why?

"Um… I'll put the flowers down."

I start feeling awkward, so I pick up the orange flowers that are next to Sakurako-san.

"Oh! Don't worry, I can replace it!" A voice suddenly calls out from behind me. I really just wanted to leave this room…

“Hello, sorry for not getting in contact for a while.”

Sakurako-san bows to the person behind me. I hurriedly turn around and see a young man standing by the door.

“This is Aoba-san,” Sakurako-san says.

Who the hell is that? I stare blankly for a moment while I think.

“Aoba-san? ...Oh! Hello- er it’s nice to meet you.”

Hideyo Aoba-san. He was the autopsy technician who was kind of Shitara-ojisan’s right hand. He’s quite tall. His shoulders are narrow, but his limbs are long giving him a slender look. His long hair is casually tied back. His glasses make him look diligent, but his hair makes him look a little lazy. He looks uncouth at first glance, but I quickly realize he has a nice face behind his glasses. Handsome guys look good no matter what they wear. I’m so envious. After a quick bow, he gives me a cheerful look and offers a handshake.

“That’s right, we’ve talked on the phone and emailed each other several times, but this is our first time meeting in person.”

I extend my hand and firmly clasp his. He has large, slender hands like Sakurako-san. His hands are pale, almost like a bone.

“I thought you were coming next week,” Aoba-san says to Sakurako-san with a charming smile.

He still hasn’t let go of my hand. It’s not like I hate handshakes, but I never know when to let go. However, it feels bad if the other person lets go too soon. While I’m still bewildered, Aoba-san looks at me like he’s interested in something. It feels like he can see into my head. I feel awkward, like I’m being made fun of.

“Um…”

“Oh!”

Just as I can’t stand it any longer and start to say something, a woman’s voice calls into the hospital room.

“Shouko-san…”

We let go of each other’s hands in the confusion. Shouko-san stands in the room with a surprised expression. She’s wearing a lovely, light pink suit. She has roses of the same colour in her hands.

“What’s this? You said you were coming next week, Saa-chan!”

“Yeah. That was my intention, but boy said he wanted to come. Next week would be inconvenient for him, so we came today.”

“I see…” Shouko-san sounds a bit angry and uncomfortable. She snatches the roses out of my hands.

Of course, we only came to Sapporo today because it was convenient for me. I wonder if there was a reason we shouldn’t have come today… Like an important test or something? I feel apologetic, so I look to Aoba-san for help.

“Then let’s all go for now,” Aoba-san says in a cheery voice.

“Huh?” Sakurako-san, Shouko-san, and I are all surprised.

“Let’s leave those two alone. I have business in Sapporo today, anyway. She put in the effort of coming here, so let’s leave them to chat.” Aoba-san explains, then winks at me.

“No, I-“

“You’re right, we shouldn’t get in the way.”

Sakurako-san tries to argue back, but Aoba-san and I pull her out into the hallway, leaving Shouko-san in the room. I'm not sure why, but it seems like it would be best for us to leave for today.

"What the hell was that?!" Sakurako-san yells after we leave the hospital room.

"As usual, Sakurako-ojousan isn't very attentive to details. Do you really have no idea?"

"Did you notice something, Aoba-san?"

"Recently… Those two have been visiting a lot."

"Ms. Shouko has?"

"Yes."

The question "why?" is written all over Sakurako-san's face.

"Ah!" I unintentionally gasp once I realize what Aoba-san meant. "Then Aoba-san, you mean..."

"Yes, most likely. The professor looked happy, too." Aoba-san grins and nods.

I'm really surprised, but I can't help but smile.

"I see…"

"What does that mean?!" Sakurako-san says, irritated.

It means exactly what it sounds like. It's *that*. Shouko-san was once introduced as a potential partner for marriage for Shitara-ojisan. They both know Sakurako-san, and treasure her. They still have that in common, and they're both single now. It's not strange for the distance between them to shrink over all this time. Besides, it seems like a very Shouko-san-ish choice to make. Shouko-san can still cuddle up to him even if he's ill. I feel really bad for Kouji-san, who's wholeheartedly in love with her.

Sakurako-san pouts and looks dissatisfied, apparently not understanding what Aoba-san is saying. Sakurako-san is normally very sharp, but she's not one to notice the subtleties of the human heart.

"I know, if the two of you have some time, want to come visit the university?"

"Huh?"

Aoba-san suddenly suggests to distract Sakurako-san from her bad mood.

"I thought you might want to come see the forensic pathology department. Especially for Tatewaki-kun, since it's not a place you'd get the chance to visit often. What about you, young lady? It's been a long time, want to visit?"

"That's certainly a nice invitation… How about it, boy?" Sakurako-san's eyes shine at the invitation.

"Well… Yeah, sure," I mumble.

But we're going to a forensic pathology lab. It doesn't really sound fun, so I'm not particularly excited about going.

"Don't worry, there won't be corpses just laying in the middle of a classroom. There's nothing to be afraid of." Sakurako-san snickers at my timidness.

"I know that! I want to go! Please take me!"

I accidentally blurt out from frustration because I was being made fun of. Sakurako-san and Aoba-san stare at me then start laughing. Adults are so mean. I don't like it at all.

Part 2

A forensic pathology classroom doesn't seem like the kind of place most people would often visit. I was reluctant at first, but since this is a valuable experience I pay close attention in the end. I'm already in my second year of high school, but I still don't know what I want to do with my life.

"It sure has changed," Sakurako-san says, walking through the door labelled "library."

I wonder if she knows anyone here besides Aoba-san. There's a woman in the room (who is apparently a secretary) greets us with an expression that clearly shows that they rarely get visitors here. Once Aoba-san explains the situation, her expression quickly softens. Apparently the name "Professor Shitara" still holds quite a bit of influence here.

"It's a lot cleaner here than when my uncle was around… Or maybe I should say it's quieter?"

There's work tables lined with computers, and shelves covered in files and documents… The room is well organized, and nothing here indicates that they bring corpses in here. Of course, the documents and books on the shelves are all related to forensic medicine.

"We don't work for Roku anymore. Associate professor Endou is in charge of the course right now. Unfortunately, I'm next in line to teach right now."

Aoba-san usually seems so kind and carefree, but he looks serious right now.

"Endou… Oh, him."

Sakurako-san doesn't even try to hide her frown. It doesn't seem like people think highly of this "Endou" guy.

"Back then, there were always materials and documents everywhere. It was my uncle's fortress," Sakurako-san says. She looks sort of sad.

She runs her finger along the table while she remembers the past. I didn't think she was the type to get sentimental. Just when I'm about to ask her to show me around the room, I suddenly notice something and freeze.

"Is something wrong?" Aoba-san asks me, leaning in strangely close.

"No… It's just this…"

Despite my discomfort, I point at the wall.

"Oh, the butterfly specimens. They were made by a retired professor named Yakushiji. He had a hobby of putting together insect specimens. For whatever reason, we haven't taken them down."

There's not just one, there's a whole bunch of butterflies.

"Retired professor…?"

Butterflies are both beautiful and terrifying. They're a symbol of Hanabusa. It feels like time has stopped. I can't help but shiver during Aoba-san's explanation. I saw Yakushiji, the retired professor, in Shitara-ojisan's files. I shudder. There's no way there was someone who loved butterflies near Shitara-ojisan.

"Past tense… So now he's…?" Sakurako-san asks.

"Yakushiji is 94 years old now. In the winter before last he fell and broke his femur. He's bedridden now… I went to greet him on New Year's but he doesn't seem to remember me."

"I see…"

Aoba-san speaks with a bitter voice, and Sakurako-san's expression clouds. I feel a bit relieved deep down, though, since I was able to quickly get rid of the dark thoughts passing through my mind. In Shitara-ojisan's notes, it said that Professor Yakushiji is the father of

forensics in Hokkaido. If a person like that had been committing crimes, that would be terrifying. Of course I know that butterflies equating to Hanabusa is a hasty conclusion, but Hanabusa also had extensive knowledge of anatomy. The sphenoid bone isn't easy to remove. I'm sure he must be involved in some kind of medical field, right?

"...On my 20th birthday he gave me an autopsy practice kit," Sakurako-san murmurs.

"I remember him often telling you about mysteries and old stories. He'd probably be happy if you went to visit him. He might remember you," Aoba-san says softly to Sakurako-san.

He puts his hand on her upper arm. I feel irritation welling up in my chest. I wonder what the story with this person is. They seem strangely close, or like there's not much distance between them.

"Tatewaki-kun."

"Huh?"

Aoba-san looks at me while I'm lost in thought.

"Would you rather go to the dissection room?"

"D-dissection room?" I flinch.

"It's okay. There's no corpses there today. It's not being used right now, so there's nothing to be scared of."

"I… I see."

Of course there's no corpses. I don't think he'd let me inside in the middle of an autopsy. It's obvious, but I'm still relieved.

The autopsy room is on a different floor from the forensics classroom. Aoba-san leads us down the stairs and into the room. The door to the actual autopsy room has an electronic lock, but there's a waiting room before you go in. The whole room smells like a hospital. There's desks, computers, various other machines, a couch… I guess this is where police officers wait while the autopsy is being performed. In the back, there's an area where records are stored, and a shower room. Once Aoba-san opens the door, we enter a room with a huge window looking into the autopsy room.

"What is this?"

There's an equipment rack near the door in the autopsy room. It has numerous types of plastic gloves (including the ones Sakurako-san uses), cloth gloves, and a paper bag with… Sharp things in it.

"These are the replacement scalpel blades."

"Why do you have to replace the blades?"

"That's just the way they are."

That's it? Aoba-san gives me a curious look. Apparently it's obvious to him. I guess it's my fault for not knowing the blade was replaced each time an autopsy was performed. I also didn't know the blade could be taken off. I wonder why they don't just wash and reuse them?

"There's so many kinds of gloves, aren't there?"

Not only do they have all different sizes, but all different materials as well.

"It depends on the condition of the body. As a backup measure, you can put two layers of gloves on, too. I prefer nitrile gloves, though." It's Sakurako-san, not Aoba-san, who replies to me.

She sounds like a real forensic scientist. Aoba-san looks delighted.

"We use other things, too, like caps."

We go through all the equipment I'm curious about, one by one. I'm still hesitant about actually going in there, though. Meanwhile, Sakurako-san couldn't get in there any faster. She pulls me into the room while I try to cling to the door frame.

"Wow…"

So this is where they open up corpses. It doesn't smell as bad as I expected… I thought it might have the stench of death. Of course, it's not like it's completely odourless. It smells sort of sweet, like old protein. It still smells, but it doesn't make me feel sick.

"You know… it kind of looks like a school cafeteria."

Vinyl floors, silver work tables, the large sinks... at a glance, the autopsy room really looks like a cafeteria. But instead of the old lunch lady in a white apron, it's forensic pathologists and police officers in white lab coats and boots.

"Now that you mention it, it does."

Sakurako-san and Aoba-san laugh. Apparently they never thought about it before.

Next to the table where the bodies are placed there's various measuring cups and ladles, among other instruments that I don't know the names of. However, below that, there's hammers, coping saws, and various other terrifying tools. There's no way that stuff would be in a cafeteria.

"Oh! Is this the ladle from that time? That wine tasting?"

I was told that story by Sakurako-san and Shouko-san. Shitara-ojisan intentionally tried to make Shouko-san hate him so they could call off the marriage arrangements. They went to a winery on a trip and he said that the ladle for scooping the wine from the barrel was the same as one he used during autopsies… I point at a small-ish ladle with a black handle. "Oh!" Aoba-san says, and smiles at the memory.

"That's right. Scooping up bodily fluids is just like scooping red wine, it feels super gross. After all, everyone here stopped drinking it."

Aoba-san continues explaining what various things are for, such as the large recording device, white board, and two sinks at different heights. For example, the sinks. Apparently it's customary here for the police to handle cleaning the supplies after the autopsy. I don't know what it's like in other laboratories, though. The sinks need to accommodate people of different heights. I'm surprised that there's even x-ray and CT machines.

"Now for the robots, in other words, CT scans, x-rays, and MRIs are used in autopsies. You don't need any special qualifications to use them since the person is dead," Sakurako-san says, laughing.

I see, I guess it makes sense that you wouldn't need the same qualifications. I'm impressed that they can investigate bodies without even cutting them open.

"But in the end, CT scans and MRIs are just computer graphics, not photographs. They haven't been used in many cases in the past, since they're not very trustworthy. They can also only be used on bodies that have died very recently."

"Why?"

"After about half a day, gases collect inside the body. The MRI can't see through the gas, so it looks all hazy. I don't know about hospitals, but it doesn't see much use here."

"It's also hard to tell if a bone is broken unless it's misaligned with those machines," Sakurako-san adds.

Of course she'd bring up bones.

“They’re quite effective if you use a scalpel to open up an area, like the lungs. We’re all hoping they become more accurate in the future.”

“It seems like… Nothing beats having a human performing the autopsy, then?”

“That's right. You can’t hear the voices of the deceased unless you listen for it. They’re desperately trying to speak, but very few people can hear them. They’re quite eloquent.” Aoba-san says bitterly as he leans against the door to the morgue.

“Professor Shitara is an excellent forensic scientist. He has a gift for hearing the voices of the dead. It’s a tragedy that he had to leave this line of work. It feels like there’s so many truths we miss out on everyday without him here. Endou is a truly incompetent man.”

I can feel his frustration deep in my chest. I don’t think it’s such a good idea to complain about your boss publicly like this. He must be so angry that he doesn’t care where he is.

“To tell you the truth, there’s a chance that this department will be closed down. I want to protect it, though. Perhaps we could do some exciting research, and maybe even cure professor Shitara’s illness!”

“Unfortunately, that’s impossible. Even if a cure were found tomorrow, by the time my uncle gets it, he won’t be in this world anymore.” Sakurako-san says quietly, shutting down Aoba-san’s excitement.

Her face shows no expression as she calmly talks about the death of her loved one. For Sakurako-san, there’s nothing except the hard facts.

“Of course… I know that it’s just a dream. Even so, I still want to believe. I’ll protect this place he left behind no matter what. Professor Shitara is a man of justice. He’s not selfish. He’s like a saint that saves the deceased!”

“Aoba-san…”

Anger burns in his dark eyes behind his glasses. It’s a ferocious anger, full of hatred. I can feel his madness as he scrapes his nails against the wall. This person is not normal. But how can I say no to someone who spends every day dealing with the sense of helplessness and loneliness of trying to help the dead? Spending every day in despair without salvation must be more cruel than I can imagine.

“...I always believed you would come back here.”

“I…”

Aoba-san stares at Sakurako-san with the eyes of a dead man. His voice deepens. Sakurako-san stiffens.

“L-let’s go home now, Sakurako-san.”

I start to panic, and pull on her sleeve. My instincts are screaming at me that talking to him any more is dangerous. We’re too close to the land of the dead.

“Today was a valuable experience, thank you very much,” I say, bowing, but Aoba-san doesn’t reply.

He puts both hands on one of the doors and presses his forehead to it. It’s like he’s listening to the voice of the corpse sleeping behind it.

Part 3

As soon as we get back in the car I feel relieved, and my body feels heavy. I seem to have been really nervous without knowing it, I'm covered in sweat. My knuckles are sore from clenching my hands into fists.

"How should I put it… he was really enthusiastic about his work. I was a little scared, though," I say to Sakurako-san as she starts the engine.

She doesn't reply. As soon as the car starts up, the singing voice of His Excellency, Diavel, fills the car. As usual, Sakurako-san's face shows no anger, sadness, and of course, no smile either. She grabs the steering wheel with a blank face. She's giving off the feeling that I shouldn't talk to her.

"...He was very helpful."

"Huh?"

Sakurako-san mutters a few words after a while.

"You mean in the past?"

I remember that Sakurako-san stayed with her uncle during the summer vacation of her third year of high school.

"He lives in Nayoro. He helped escort me back home after I left my uncle's house in the summer."

"I see…"

"My mother hanged herself that day."

"Huh?"

A cold pain runs through my chest. The sharp pain reminds me of the time I got stabbed.

"...Your mother did that?"

"Yeah. It was while gran was picking me up from the station. Gran was happy to see us again, so to thank Aoba-san for bringing me home, she treated us to cake and tea at the usual store. We talked for a whole hour."

My body shakes to the core as she talks about her memories of that summer. Sakurako-san speaks while facing forward, holding the steering wheel. I feel like it's the first time I've heard her talk about her mother.

"There was a cherry blossom tree in the garden. My mother hanged herself from it and died. My grandpa and gran were both crying over her corpse. Aoba-san took care of everything for us. Without him, I wouldn't have known what to do."

The cherry blossom tree in the yard. The same tree that Sakurako-san is named after.

"But... But why did she commit suicide?"

"After Soutarou passed, our family was in shambles. He was everything to our mother. When he died, so did my mother's heart. She lived each day by just going through the motions. The final straw was when my father decided to get a divorce. Gran says my mother has always been a pitiful person."

A bereaved family will always be bereaved. Those words Sakurako-san said before pass through my mind. Their hearts will always be broken. They'll never be the same again. Sakurako-san is always kind to the bereaved families, even though she doesn't understand the subtleties of the human heart.

I finally get it. She knows about it. Even if she doesn't understand them, she still knows what they're going through. She's gone through it personally. The suffering of having your loved ones stolen from you. She knows that they're falling apart. That's why she's so kind to the

bereaved. Even if she can't sympathize with their sadness, she's been through the exact same thing. She loves bones and dead things, but she also isn't a maniac who condones taking a life.

"Anyway, Aoba-san was a huge help to me. He even participated in my mother's autopsy. Since I wasn't allowed to attend, he explained everything about it in minute detail. The cause of death was suffocation due to a fractured cervical vertebra, but the autopsy also found stomach cancer."

"Stomach cancer?"

"Yes. I'm not sure if she ever saw any symptoms. However, if she hadn't hanged herself, she still wouldn't have had much time. It had already gotten to her peritoneum."

"I see…"

"Don't look at me like that… It was a long time ago."

Sakurako-san smiles at me to brighten up my gloomy expression. It's a gentle, yet lonely smile. Sakurako-san's heart is different from mine. But that doesn't mean she doesn't harbour pain and sadness in her. Avoiding the topic of her mom is proof of that.

"You don't have to force yourself to talk about it, okay?"

"I know… Well… It's fine once in a while."

I'm glad she opened up to me, but I don't want to make her feel sad. Maybe she wanted to talk about it. I didn't think Sakurako-san had such an emotional side.

"Well anyway, don't say bad things about Aoba-san. He cares for my uncle like family."

"Alright… Understood."

I suddenly feel a little irritated that I'm being scolded. Of course, I get what she means. I don't want to think of him like that, either, but he… Gave me this indescribably eerie feeling, like he was unstable somehow. Still, I trust Sakurako-san's judgement of him above all else.

"...For some reason, saying that about someone doesn't seem like something you'd normally do."

"Why? Even I can feel respect for other people. He's worthy of my respect."

"I meant… Believing in someone wholeheartedly."

Sakurako-san always says not to trust anyone, even Kougami. She's even been suspicious of Utsumi-san before.

"For example, if you accused my uncle of committing a crime, I couldn't believe you. He simply couldn't do that."

"Of course I know that, but…"

"The same goes for Aoba-san. He's my uncle's right hand. He's the one person my uncle trusts most, so why should we doubt him?"

"..."

If I say anything else, it would just cause an argument. I turn away from her and press my cheek against the car window. To Sakurako-san, her uncle is special. She looks up to him and adores him more than anyone else, but she's so blinded by that, that she forgets herself. I think professor Shitara is an amazing person, but he's still "human." He's not an alien like Sakurako-san.

I notice my unsightly expression in my reflection on the window. This emotion inside of me is a little different from anger, but it's hard to put into words. I think it might be "jealousy."

Part 4

Sakurako-san seems to notice my bad mood on our way back from the forensic science classroom. She starts telling me about the new polar bear cub at the Maruyama zoo that was just revealed to the public last month. We visit the zoo (mostly to see the skeleton section), visit the big bookstore in Shinkawa, then head back to Asahikawa. The next day, Imai and I went biking to increase our endurance and see the rapeseed flowers. After two consecutive days of outings, I'm completely exhausted, and spend my time napping on the couch. My mom told me to go sleep in my room, but it feels so nice to drink some soda in front of the TV after a bath and doze off. Especially after exercising. I could lay on the couch all day… Except my phone suddenly starts ringing, tearing me away from my blissful nap.

"Geez, who is it…"

I feel a little irritated. I look at the name on the incoming call and see that it's Aoba-san.

"..."

I'm completely bewildered for a moment. It's times like this where I'm jealous that Sakurako-san doesn't have a phone. I can't just ignore it, though. I reluctantly pick up the call. He's calling to apologize for yesterday. Apparently a doctor told him about professor Shitara's current condition before he met us yesterday. He's not deteriorating rapidly, though it's definitely getting worse. He says that Shitara-ojisan is gradually reaching his limit, and Aoba-san was struggling with feeling helpless. The world of medical examiners sure is serious. I listen as he continues to talk.

I don't know where Hanabusa is. I also don't know who the bones that were found alongside Futaba-san's body belong to. In all honesty, only a small amount of information can be gathered from bones during forensic examinations. Medicine is not magic. However, people seek miracles and magic. They want a wizard that can use it. Sakurako-san is extraordinary. She must have inherited that from her uncle. But I also understand the limitations placed on her. Aoba-san has also known her for longer than I have.

"But… Sakurako-san is different from her uncle. Shitara-sensei is a totally different person," I say.

"I understand that, of course. That day I just felt a bit too sentimental… I lost my composure. So, as an apology, I'd like to invite the two of you somewhere again."

"Invite us?"

"Yes. I'm visiting an acquaintance in Biei next week, so I'd be delighted if you two would join me."

"Biei, huh…"

Honestly, there's nothing special about Biei. Besides, is there any merit in accompanying him to visit someone I don't even know?

"The person I'm visiting raises beautiful snakes. He's a breeder."

"A snake breeder?"

"Yeah. I talked to him about taking one that passed away for a specimen. I know the young lady will be pleased, but do you have plans already, Tatewaki-kun?"

"Uh…"

A trip to see beautiful snakes, huh? Honestly, it's not something I really want to do. I wonder why he bothered inviting me? I'm worried he might say something weird like he did last

time, too. But even if I don't go, Sakurako-san will. Just the two of them. The thought of that makes me feel uneasy. Maybe it's just jealousy, or maybe it's because I just can't bring myself to like Aoba-san.

"That sounds like fun. I'd love to go with you!"

I don't want him to think I'm a scary-cat who hates snakes, so I force my happiest tone I can muster.

"Good, I'm glad."

I can hear Aoba-san snicker through the phone. I can't tell if he saw through me, or if he's actually just happy.

On Saturday the week after inviting me, Aoba-san comes to Asahikawa. Sakurako-san is wearing a white dress, and Aoba-san is wearing a white shirt with chino pants, so they look like they're matching. They give off the same vibe, too. I look completely out of place with my black cargo pants, striped shirt, and navy blue hoodie. Aoba-san seems strangely close, like he was last time. He's talking to me like we've known each other forever. I feel sick. He must think of me as "Soutarou."

"..."

I don't feel so well, but it can't be helped. People associate me with the ghost of the Kujou family, but I still decided to stay by her side. At least Sakurako-san doesn't see me as Soutarou-kun. Besides, I'm completely unrelated to her family. A total stranger. In order to be accepted by the people around me, I have to be "Soutarou." It was confusing at first, but I've gotten used to it.

Sakurako-san is the one driving today. In the car, we discuss how the weather is a bit stormy today, the recent murders in Sapporo, and the new supermarket in Asahikawa. Aoba-san is calm the whole time, and it feels like he really cares about both of us. He must really have been "distracted" last time, like he said. He and Sakurako-san really are professor Shitara's only "family."

It's no exaggeration to call Biei a city of flowers, but it's a little early in the season to see much. We head in the direction towards mount Tokachi. I'd love to come to Biei by bike, so I can see the flower highway, Zerubu hill, and the Ken and Mary tree (apparently it's famous for being in a car commercial, but it always makes me think of the timber wolf siblings I saw the first time I visited Asahiyama.) I usually go down the patchwork road, so I don't see them much.

Our destination is near Birke forest. Apparently "birke" is German for birch. As the name suggests, it's a nice, quiet place filled with birch trees. Tatsumi Tainaka-san, the snake breeder, greets us when we arrive. He's surprisingly normal. Based on the fact that he works with snakes I thought he'd be pretty weird, but he's a kind man in his forties. He's a bit thin, has fleshy earlobes, and has a mole slightly off centre on his forehead. He looks jolly, somehow. He's nothing like the terrifying image the word "snake" brings to mind.

"Isn't it unusual for there to be a snake breeder in Hokkaido?"

He's so friendly, so I ask my first question once we go into the snake breeding room. After all, snakes make you think of warm places.

"Hokkaido is quite suitable for raising reptiles."

"Even though they're cold blooded?"

"Even so, the indoor temperature still doesn't drop below 20 degrees even during the winter."

“Oh, I see!”

It’s true that homes in Hokkaido are always warm, even on the coldest winter days. The summers are hot, but they’re not very long. That means it’s warm inside all the time. Apparently since Tainaka-san loves snakes so much, his home was built with them in mind. He leads us into a temperature and humidity-controlled room full of aquariums. There’s no windows, so it reminds me of Sakurako-san’s “bone room.”

“It’s relatively easy to capture Japanese rat snakes, pit vipers, Japanese striped snakes, and burrowing rat snakes. Among those, the Japanese rat snakes in Hokkaido have particularly nice colours. At the Maruyama zoo there’s lovely specimens with a morph called Ezo blue…”

It seems like the rooms aren’t the only similarity between the two of them. For about an hour, Tainaka-san continues gushing about snakes. I mean, he did have his house built around them. Just as Sakurako-san loves bones, this man’s whole life revolves around snakes.

Sakurako-san and Aoba-san are listening to the explanation, and I don’t want to look at the tanks without permission, so I have no choice but to follow Tainaka-san’s guided tour. His love for his snakes gradually eases my discomfort towards them.

“You’re right, this is super pretty!”

I can’t help but voice my admiration after seeing the jet black snake in the tank.

“That’s a crow morph. It’s a melanistic Japanese striped snake. They live all across Japan, but they’re particularly abundant in Hokkaido.”

“Is the black a dominant trait, then?”

“The black colouration collects more sunlight, so it’s supposedly an adaptation to help them survive in the cold.”

It’s scales are so shiny. I’m in awe at its beauty.

“This is a splendid snake.” Sakurako-san stands behind me and peeks into the tank. “Once this one dies, could I have it? I’d love to make a skeletal specimen out of it.”

“I don’t have any plans for it yet…”

“Of course, it would be nice if it grew a bit bigger first…”

“I have a friend who lives nearby who breeds crow morph Japanese striped snakes. He has an even nicer individual than this one, so I can talk to him for you. He’s preserving the skin, but I don’t think he’d mind parting with the bones.”

He tells me about how people sometimes kill pit vipers, then pickle them in shochu so they can eat them. He also tells me about a type of snake from overseas called a corn snake that’s apparently quite docile and easy to handle, which would be perfect for someone who is scared of them, like me. They’re rather cute. I don’t think my mom would ever allow it, but I’d like the opportunity to keep one some day if I could. It’d take some time for me to get used to keeping frozen mice in the freezer and feeding it.

Aoba-san watches from a short distance away while I look at the snakes.

“Apparently he doesn’t really like snakes,” Tainaka-san says, letting out a chuckle.

“You don’t?”

“I came today to ask about the toxicity and tooth marks from a pit viper. I’m really grateful for today, but… in the end, I’m not very good with snakes,” Aoba-san says, shrugging his shoulders.

At least Sakurako-san is in a good mood since she gets to talk to Tainaka-san about specimens and snake bones. Aoba-san must have picked this place as an apology to her. He wants to make up for hurting her the other day.

Somehow, we end up hitting it off and decide to go to the nearby Shirogane hot spring before heading home. Shirogane is a famous hot spring resort at the foot of Mount Tokachidake. I've been there with my grandpas several times. I especially like the open-air bath. While I'm enjoying the hot water, Aoba-san, who is next to me, let's out a small scream.

"Ah, another one?"

There's a bright green snake swimming on the surface of the bath water. Tainaka-san notices it, and grabs the net hanging by the door to the bath.

"Is it a Japanese rat snake?"

"Yeah. It's warm, so they climb in pretty often."

"Oh, I see…"

Tainaka-san swiftly scoops it up in the net like he's done it a million times. Since it's not venomous, I follow Tainaka-san's instructions and pick up a snake for the first time, then put it down a short distance away. It's strangely moving to be so powerful as to interact with another life like that. It has such a strong feeling of vitality to it, it's different from playing with a dog.

Tainaka-san meets up with an acquaintance who's also at the hot spring, and says he'd like to stay a little longer, so we disband our little group. On the way back we decide to stop by the Shirogane Blue Pond, since it's been pretty popular lately. Apparently Aoba-san and Sakurako-san have never been there. Tainaka-san said that it's a little too early for tourists to be there, so now is a good time to go.

Blue Pond is a famous sightseeing spot in Biei. This spot used to be relatively unknown since entry was prohibited, but Apple used a picture of it was used as a default wallpaper, so word spread quickly.

"Why are you so happy to see a blue lake?" Sakurako-san asks me while we walk through the birch tree-lined path.

The mysterious beauty of this place is said to capture the hearts of anyone who visits. Eventually we can see the lake through the forest.

"Look… Isn't it pretty?"

The water really is a vibrant cobalt blue. It might be a bit cliche, but it looks like the colour of blue Hawaii shaved ice. It's completely different from the blue of the sky. The water is incredibly clear, and the dead birch trees sticking out from the water on the opposite shore look almost magical. Maybe it's because it's not quite spring yet, but there don't seem to be any signs of life here.

"There's no fish?"

"No, there aren't. I've heard that the water is uninhabitable for animals."

This was originally a man-made lake. Apparently it gets the beautiful colour from the aluminum in the water mixing with the water from the Biei river, which forms a colloid mixture. It's pretty, but in a different way from the snakes. They're both awe inspiring, and they're both silent and tranquil. The difference is that the snakes were overflowing with life. They had the strength of living creatures. On the other hand, this place is full of death. The pond has no

animals, the trees are dead, and it's unnaturally blue. Even though it's beautiful, the sense of "death" is overpowering. The withered birch trees look like bones.

When Sakurako-san stands at the edge of the pond, she looks like she's just another part of the landscape. I instantly feel scared. I feel this strange, overpowering anxiety like she'll stop breathing, too. It's like the world of the dead is beckoning for her to join them.

"Sakurako-san… Um…"

I unintentionally call her name. I should just keep this to myself.

"...It would've been nice to bring Hector."

She snickers and mumbles something.

"Huh?"

I take a breath. Suddenly, I smell something unpleasant in the wind. Aoba-san also seems to be looking in the direction the odour if coming from. It's the unmistakable scent of death, like rotting meat.

"Is it a deer?"

"Let's see."

The two of them set off in search of the origin of the scent. Their slightly tense expressions give me a bad feeling about this. There's no way it isn't a human. I don't want to be here. I follow behind them as they search in the bushes around the lake. How can they look at something so awful so naturally? While loosely following the path, I look toward where the water from the Biei river is flowing in, and spot a lump that I wish I hadn't seen.

"S-Sakurako-san… that…"

I accidentally fall backwards onto the muddy ground. Sakurako-san lets out a rising whistle when she looks in the direction I'm pointing. There's a single figure laying on the white gravel near where the pond meets the river.

"Well done, boy."

I glance over my shoulder while still trembling on the ground, but both of them are just putting on nitrile gloves. Sakurako-san snaps the plastic against her wrist. Sakurako-san excitedly heads over to where "it" is, not caring that her feet are getting wet.

"Don't touch it! You can't disturb the scene!" Aoba-san says to her while he helps me up. "...Corpses aren't scary."

"Yes they are!"

He does autopsies for a living, of course he isn't scared of dead bodies. I'm not like that, though. I'm scared.

"There's no need to be. Living humans are scarier. Dead people can't do anything. They can't even move. That's why the living have to help them out."

"I… guess, but…"

It's not like I don't get what he's saying, but it's instinctual to avoid them. It's like everything inside of me is screaming at me to not look.

"Do you feel sick when you look at corpses?"

"It just feels like something you shouldn't look at."

"Why? It's just the next stage of life for a human. There's nothing bad about it."

He holds out a hand, urging me to get up.

"Usually adults tell you as a kid not to look at things like that."

"I see. That means you're still a child."

But I can't help it. Aoba-san gives up on trying to convince me and takes a step back. I'm angry now.

"Why… Why do you want me to look at that corpse so badly?!" I yell at Aoba-san after getting up on my own.

It's annoying to be ridiculed about not wanting to look at a corpse of all things.

"I don't know."

"Huh?"

His response is so simple that it's kind of a letdown.

"But this also isn't the first time you've seen a corpse. I think it's better for you if you face it head on and overcome your fear. I've seen students while they watch their first autopsy. It's not uncommon for the whole class to be freaked out at first. Still, day by day, they shorten the distance between themselves and the body."

"Distance?"

"Yes. If you go home right now, you'll only be left with unpleasant memories. But if you face it directly… I'm sure you'll be able to accept it. Please think it over carefully. Are you really scared of a helpless body?"

He's right, I'm not really scared… Not that I could say that to him now. I'd rather not see another corpse for the rest of my life. Yet somehow, I understand what he's trying to say. I don't agree with him, though. In the end, I stand next to Sakurako-san at the edge of the lake. Her hair is being blown around in the wind.

"Watch your step." Aoba-san says, supporting me with his hand on my back.

Maybe he's just trying to keep me from running away. I ready myself, then step towards the body. I don't want to explain it, but it's probably the most damaged corpse I've encountered so far. It has a harsh, intense smell, but it's somehow familiar. I don't feel so well, but it feels like I can stand the nausea easier than normal this time.

"Aoba-san, look at this." Sakurako-san notices that we're nearby and points to the corpse.

"It has no head… Or clothes?" His voice is shaking.

I feel bad for this person, lying here without a head or any clothes.

"Yesterday there was a warning about water levels rising after the heavy rain and the snow thawing. It probably got washed here from upstream."

Aoba-san looks upstream. It's true that the weather has been bad for the last 2 days.

"A pond… and a body with no head…"

A headless corpse. A corpse that has had the butterfly within its skull snatched away.

"Do you think this could be the work of Hanabusa?"

"I don't know. The situation is definitely similar, but it isn't the same. I don't think it was him this time."

"Could it be a copycat?"

"The police and media aren't aware of Hanabusa's existence. If it's a copycat, they'd have to know Hanabusa." Aoba-san replies with a grim expression.

"But the head…"

"Besides, if it came from upstream, it's not unusual that it would have no head or clothes."

"Huh?"

Aoba-san looks at Sakurako-san.

“That’s true. It’s common for clothes to slip off while a body is moving with a current. The head can also be taken off the same way. Especially when the head or neck rots quickly… For example, if the neck is damaged at the time of death, it’s not unusual for that area to decompose faster, causing the head to come off in the current.”

So it’s possible that it was a normal water accident, or that they were killed via strangulation and abandoned upstream.

“There’s no personal belongings. It may have been done to hide their identity.”

“At any rate, we have to report this first. This isn’t under Sapporo’s jurisdiction, but we can talk about that later.”

Aoba-san holds back Sakurako-san’s arms since she looks like she’s about to reach out and touch the body. We just came to the Blue Pond to do some sightseeing, I never expected we’d need to call the police again. It wouldn’t be good for Sakurako-san to get involved with the police again, so she returned to the car while Aoba-san and I wait for the officers to show up.

“...It’s a woman.”

She was laying face down, so I didn’t know. For some reason, I murmur my thoughts.

“From what I can tell, you’re right. We can’t say for sure yet, though. Are you scared?”

“Huh?”

“Is her corpse still terrifying?”

“I guess not… I just feel bad for them now.”

Found with no belongings or identifying information… Of course I feel sorry for someone in that situation. Their family must be looking for them, too. I wonder what exactly happened, and how they ended up here.

“That kind of empathy isn’t good. The dead are still people. If you get too emotionally invested, you won’t be able to open them up. I’m human, too. You have to draw the line somewhere.”

“...What do you mean?”

The way he spoke makes it seem like he’s making some strange implications. Aoba-san smiles behind his glasses.

“Curiously, while doing this kind of work, you sometimes see the path a person took.”

“Path?”

“Yes. If you look at a group of students, I can immediately tell which ones are joining the forensic science course.”

“Wh…?! But I’m not-!”

“You’re right, Aoba-san. Unfortunately for you, he’s going to be working with specimens in the future.”

“Huh? Oh, no, I’m not going to…”

Before I even noticed she was there, Sakurako-san put her hands on my shoulders. I guess she came back while I wasn’t looking. I can hear the police sirens getting closer.

“That’s up to him to decide, not you,” Aoba-san says with a frown.

I'm definitely not planning on making skeletal specimens as an adult.

“Well, whatever. He’s still young. Let’s wait in the car together for now. We should leave this to Aoba-san.” Sakurako-san briskly walks back to the parking lot. Her dress is swaying as she walks. I follow her for a bit, then stop.

“Aoba-san!” I look back and call for him. He tilts his head like he’s asking “what is it?” “I’m… Not Soutarou-kun.” I finally run out of patience and tell him clearly.

Sure, I don’t vomit when I see a corpse anymore. Maybe I am just taking his place next to Sakurako-san, but I’m not the real Soutarou-kun. I’m not going to be a medical examiner in her place. Aoba-san blinks in surprise, then smiles just a little bit.

“Of course, you’re Shoutarou Tatewaki-kun. The children of the Kujou family can’t become medical examiners.”

“...Huh?”

“You don’t have to rush. You can go now. I’ll clear up all the trouble.” Aoba-san gently pushes my shoulder to urge me to leave. I want to get back to the car as soon as possible. He pats my head gently before I go. I shudder.

I finally realize that it was all a misunderstanding. This person wanted me to go into a career related to forensics, he wasn’t projecting someone else onto me. Doing any job related to forensics or skeletons would be impossible for me. It’s ridiculous to even consider it. I could never get used to it, or be as amazing as professor Shitara. I just couldn’t do it. Even so, couldn’t I still help the search with this person?

As I see the lights on the police cars approaching, I glance at Aoba-san. He’s standing by the blue lake, phone in hand, looking at the body. He, too, is far too close to death.

Part 5

A few days later, Aoba-san gives me some information about the corpse. It had been about 2 weeks since her death, she was likely between 20 and 40 years old, and had never given birth. Since they haven’t found her head, they can’t establish an identity. Unfortunately, it’s the same information I got from the news on TV. They talk about the body found at the Blue Pond tourist attraction for a day or two, but since no progress has been made on the case, the topic soon switches to the popular actor that was caught cheating.

“It’s very difficult to determine the identity of a corpse with no belongings, surgical scars, or head. It can’t be helped.”

Apparently the police have searched all over upstream from where the body was, looking for more remains. Unfortunately, they didn’t find any clothes, belongings, or her head.

“Even if this wasn’t done by Hanabusa, the fact of the matter is that there’s no skull. The head may have been dealt with separately to hide the person’s identity, or to hide the cause of death. Either way, the criminal likely planned this,” Sakurako-san mutters while sitting in her usual chair with her fingers tented.

“If you could put the bones together and examine them you might have been able to figure something out, Sakurako-san. It’s too bad.”

Sakurako-san gives me a dry smile while she pets Hector, who has his chin on her lap.

“Bones are eloquent, but not omnipotent, but… I have a bad feeling about the way things are right now.”

The only thing Sakurako-san wants is to know the truth. I’m mesmerized by Sakurako-san’s pensive expression as she’s deep in thought. Hector gives a short bark as if

he's saying "Please pay attention to me!" At the same time, my phone notifies me of an incoming email.

"Ah… It's from Aoba-san, he's asking if we want to at least go bring flowers."

"Flowers?"

Sakurako-san wrinkles her nose for a moment like she's thinking it's too bothersome. I can tell Sakurako-san is wondering why we should have to leave flowers at the spot where we found the body, so I debate about if I should refuse or just go by myself. I look down at the screen.

"I see. You're coming over in the morning next Saturday, right?"

"Huh? Ah… yeah. I like to spend lots of time with Hector once in a while."

"I see. Let's go to that spot again with Hector. He might find something."

Hector perks up at the sound of his name. He looks over at me with his tongue hanging out. It's hard to believe such an innocent looking dog is an expert at finding dead bodies.

Several days later, we visit the birch tree forest again. It's just as quiet and still as last time. The white trees look like bones. I hope this doesn't traumatize me. The only sound is that of Hector panting with excitement.

"Good boy, Hector." Sakurako-san praises her beloved dog.

"It couldn't be… You didn't know this would be here, did you, young lady?" Aoba-san says in protest.

I'm shocked. There's someone in the trees, staring back at me with hollow eyes.

"I would have come alone if I'd known. I can't bring anything home if we're together." Sakurako-san shrugs. Her tone doesn't give any indication on if she's lying or not. It's probably true.

"So this is still here, so I guess it hasn't been more than a few days?" Sakurako-san ignores Aoba-san as he tries to stop her, and puts on her nitrile gloves. She picks up a white envelope.

"It looks like a suicide note."

Sakurako-san opens the letter.

"You can't just open that without permission!"

"It's fine, I'll give it right back."

"You really shouldn't tamper with the crime scene!"

Their voices sound quiet and far away. All I can hear is the sound of my heartbeat pounding in my ears. Hector pokes his nose against my foot.

"Stop that, Hector." I hug his fluffy white fur.

It's the body of a man who hanged himself. Just a short way from the parking lot, there's still yellow police tape in some spots. It looks like people were forbidden from entering until yesterday. I try to head back to the pond to put my flowers down, but Hector starts running in the opposite direction. With my back to the pond, I chase after Hector as he goes racing through the vegetation where the young man's corpse is.

He looks older than me, but younger than Sakurako-san. Sakurako-san and Aoba-san think it's been a few days since he died. It's been cold for the last few days, so he hasn't decomposed much and there aren't many maggots.

“Maybe we should remove the rope… I guess we can’t, huh?”

I ask without thinking while we wait for the police because it feels so wrong to just leave him hanging there. I feel the urge to untie the rope, at least. Sakurako-san has already lost interest and is just wandering around. Aoba-san shakes his head.

“I guess you’re right, he’s already dead after all. Let’s just wait for the police.”

I know that. I know that, but I still want to do it. As you’d expect, Aoba-san doesn’t seem too thrilled about needing to make another report. It can’t be helped, though. We just came here to offer flowers at the spot where we found the other body, smelled something strange, followed it, and found another corpse. He explains it just as it happened. He tells them just the facts.

Due to the rope remaining on his neck, he’s determined to have died from atypical hanging. The direct cause of death was suffocation due to pressure on the neck. Aoba-san tries to comfort me by saying he probably didn’t suffer for long. He died while looking straight at Blue Pond. His suicide note says the following:

“I got into a fight with the woman I’m dating. She was furious and attacking me, and while trying to resist, I realized that I had killed her. I abandoned her body in Blue Pond so I don’t bother my family. I’m going to die at the place I left her body since I can’t bear the burden on my conscience.”

He committed suicide because of the corpse we found. If I hadn’t said I wanted to go to Blue Pond, maybe he wouldn’t have died. The young man’s house was searched. They found the woman’s blood stains. However, they didn’t find any of her personal belongings, so they still don’t know where her head is or who she was. Since the man is also dead, they don’t have much choice but to declare the case solved.

It’s a few days later now, and while I’m on my way to Sakurako-san’s house after school, I find myself wondering about why I came across that corpse. It had never happened to me before I met Sakurako-san. With that in mind, why do I keep visiting the Kujo family? I answer my own question when Hector welcomes me with his biggest smile, I drink gran’s delicious tea, and Sakurako-san says “Well done, boy” with a smile.

“I guess they never found the head in the end.”

“That’s right. They found scratches on the bones that suggested he hesitated several times while removing it,” Sakurako-san says without even looking at me. She’s too busy fixing her ezo rabbit specimen.

“Huh?” Does that mean her head was actually cut off, rather than falling off after the body was dumped?

“Aoba-san thinks he probably tried to disassemble the body so it was easier to dispose of, but he couldn’t stand hurting his girlfriend, so he left it as it was.”

“Do you have a different theory?”

“Yes, I do. It seems like the tip of the knife was pointed at the second cervical vertebra.”

“Why does that matter? …Oh.” Sakurako-san stops working and stares at me, expecting an answer. “Uhh… If they knew to cut between the first and second cervical vertebrae, they must know quite a bit about anatomy…?”

“That’s right. Unfortunately, we can’t tell if there was damage to the axis this time, since it’s missing. If there wasn’t, it would be likely that Hanabusa was involved.”

Normally when someone tries to cut off someone’s head, they go for the middle of the throat, around the Adam’s apple. It’s tough to cut through there, though. Apparently it’s a lot

easier if you cut between the first cervical vertebra and the head, or between the first and second cervical vertebrae. However, if you do it that way, it would normally leave scratches on the axis. That's why the police don't know about Hanabusa. Hanabusa can somehow remove someone's head without damaging the axis.

"As Aoba-san said, this case doesn't perfectly match up with Hanabusa's patterns. People like him value regularity, but… We also don't know everything about him. Besides, he doesn't like to get his own hands dirty. He makes his followers do the dirty work, like with Hitoe and Satsuki. He's an agitator, so to speak. Even though it was an atypical hanging, there's no doubt that the young man hanged himself, due to the rope tied around his neck. But I'm curious about this incident. I'm fascinated by it, like I'm looking at disassembled bones just waiting to be put together."

The bones of the rabbit Sakurako-san is fixing collapse. She sighs.

"...Let's message Aoba-san."

"Why?"

"He'd probably say no to you, but if I tell him I'd like to give my condolences to the man's family, he might tell me their address."

"..."

I know that I shouldn't be involving myself in this case. But I also don't want to brush it off, given that it might be the work of Hanabusa. Besides, Hanabusa might be aiming for us. The more information we have about him, the better.

"If I ever feel like I'm in danger, I'll run away immediately. I won't push myself… After all, I don't want to get hurt again."

I try to make a joke to push away the anxiety I'm feeling. Sakurako-san doesn't seem to like my joke very much.

"It'll be fine. I'll definitely protect you next time."

"What are you two talking about?"

I try to tell Sakurako-san that there's no point in protecting me if she gets hurt, but gran comes up behind me with fresh scones.

"Huh? Oh… We were just talking about maybe visiting Furano on my next day off."

"I see. You've been going there a lot lately."

"Yeah, um… Since the snow finally melted, I've been wanting to go on a walk there…"

"That's fine, then. Someone had died last time you went to Blue Pond. You two aren't getting involved with that, right?"

Gran says while placing the scones, rich clotted cream, and homemade plum jam on the table. Her words are so sharp that I almost choke on my tea, but I manage to swallow it.

"Are you okay, young lady?"

"...Of course."

"Really?"

"Don't make me repeat myself, gran." Sakurako-san brings her teacup to her lips without looking at gran.

I can't handle this conversation anymore, so I grab one of the warm, crispy scones to try to calm my pounding heart.

Part 6

Naturally, Aoba-san doesn't think we're actually going to visit the bereaved family at first. Even so, after reminding Sakurako-san not to say anything she doesn't have to, I manage to get the address. He said he wants to accompany us if the time works out for him, but for better or for worse, he's too busy.

"Let's see… Here it is, Pension Miku."

Nozomi Mikimoto is the name of the young man who lived in Biei that committed suicide. Visiting the house of someone who chose to die even though he was only in his early 20s is kind of depressing. Both of his parents moved to Hokkaido about 6 years ago and are running a pension boarding house.

I try to tell her it's rude, but Sakurako-san decides to head to their place without telling them in advance. They might say we're bothering them and tell us to leave, or they might not be there and we'll have to come back another day. Anyway, it seems like she never wants to tell anyone things in advance.

Pension Miku is on the highway called the Fresh Line on the way to Shirogane. It's near a haskap plantation with beautiful scenery, making it a nice place for a pension. It seems to be closed right now. It's only natural after all that's happened. Fortunately, there's a light blue car parked in front of the building, so there's probably someone home.

"Sorry for bothering you so suddenly."

Naturally, our sudden visit is met with confusion from the family.

"There's no need to be so polite."

A small, pretty woman greets us warmly, breaking the tense atmosphere. She tells another woman, who is probably the man's mother, that we're here about her "little brother," so I guess that means she's the older sister. She has her black hair in a braid, a white lace shirt, and a patchwork-style skirt. She looks like one of those so-called "mori girls." She really fits the countryside aesthetic of this pension house.

The father isn't here today, since he's participating in a marathon in Biei today. The mother looks tired, and she's dressed in all black.

"You didn't go to cheer him on?" I ask, but all I get is a sigh in return.

My grandpa participates in a half marathon that's held in Asahikawa every year, and I always go to cheer him on. I'm getting the feeling that this family isn't all that close.

"After what happened, she doesn't feel like leaving the house much," The older sister explains.

Still, the dad went out to run "after what happened," but maybe it's because of what happened. Maybe he wants to immerse himself in something to forget about it. That's really sad. Afterwards, we give our normal greetings, and pay our respects at the altar.

The two of them seem sort of nervous, like they're scared of what we have to say. The mom especially seems restless. Sakurako-san is getting restless, too. As soon as we leave the altar, she says, "I'd like to see your son's room." She's so impolite.

"Umm… Can I ask why?"

"I want to know about his interests, and what kind of person he was. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth to only know about the corpse, rather than the living person. I'd like to know how he lived," Sakurako-san says shamelessly.

The two women are uncomfortable, of course. That's the normal reaction.

"I see… But… The police took most of his stuff."

"That won't be a problem."

"Oh…"

The older sister tries to gently refuse, but Sakurako-san doesn't budge. She gives Sakurako-san a troubled look, then looks at me.

"Um… Did your little brother also see the body?" The sister asks timidly while looking at Sakurako-san and I.

"Huh?"

"...Oh, that's right. He was with me, too. We were taking the dog for a walk. Poor thing, he'll probably never forget about it."

Sakurako-san suddenly tugs on my shoulder and hugs me. I'm completely lost for a moment, but I've caught on now. It makes sense, our ages are too far apart to look like lovers, but too close to be parent and child. Based on the photos I've seen, I look pretty similar to Soutarou-kun, too. It's a total coincidence since we're not blood related, but Sakurako-san and I definitely have a few physical similarities.

"Is that so..." The sister nods as her eyes slowly turn red with tears. "Okay, then… I'll show you around," The older sister says, lifting her head and holding back tears. The mom quickly grabs her sleeve.

"Wait, Kanae..."

"But mom, such a young boy had to see something like that. I feel bad for him."

"But if your dad finds out…" The mom frantically mumbles things like that, but the older sister takes control and invites us inside.

"My brother lived alone apart from us."

"Alone?"

"Yeah. The room was originally for long term guests, but he was so shy… He struggled with all the guests coming and going… and there was also the smell."

"The smell?"

"Yeah, his hobby was leather craft. Processing it produces a rather unique odour, and since he had a habit of burning his failed works to get rid of them, it was giving our family a bad reputation…"

We follow her out of the pension building, through the garden behind it, and out toward a small lodge.

"This is a lovely garden. It looks like something out of a picture book."

It's still a bit early for flower season, but there's arches covered in roses and ivy, white table sets, and simple bisque ducks and rabbits.

"Gardening is my mom's hobby. I agree with you, it's like a living fairytale." Somehow, her voice sounds cynical.

We pass a pond with small frogs swimming in it as we head to the entrance of the lodge. A spider on the sunny porch quickly hides in a crevice in a tree as we approach.

"I see, so even if he killed someone here, you wouldn't hear the screams."

"..." The older sister's hands freeze for a moment as she tries to unlock the door. "...Come in. The police have investigated it, so it probably isn't the same as before.

The door creaks open. There's a peculiar, slightly damp smell coming from inside. It's a small but cozy maisonette style building with a fireplace, small kitchen, and shower included. There's a fridge, a big freezer, and even air conditioning. It seems like it would be pretty comfortable no matter how hot or cold it gets.

"The police really rifled through everything, so… Sorry it's such a mess. I don't think they took much, though."

"That's alright. The woman hasn't been identified, and her head hasn't been found. The police are most focused on that aspect," Sakurako-san says bluntly.

I'm confused, since she isn't acting like her normal self. She's normally a lot kinder to families that have lost someone. The sister said it's okay to leave our shoes on, so Sakurako-san strolls right into the room. There's an empty fish tank, book, a compass, a poison remover, a hiking backpack, and several tools that I can't identify. I feel bad looking through all of this.

"Have you ever met the woman that was killed?"

"I have to help with the business, and this place is kind of far away, but… He didn't murder her. It was self defence." The sister gradually becomes angry after answering Sakurako-san's questions.

A middle aged man wearing a jersey appears behind her. The sister introduces us to the man, who is apparently the father. He's well built, and seems like he trains quite a bit. His skin is sunburned, and he has rather rough facial features. He has a lot of white hair, but he looks young enough that it's hard to believe he has two kids in their 20s.

"Self defence, huh? Did the police say that?"

"They said it was likely, but it could have been excessive force. But all of us believe that his girlfriend was going to kill him unless he did something."

"What a convenient explanation." Sakurako-san snorts.

"What did you just say?"

"I was surprised to learn your son's hobby was leather craft. Were you ever interested in it?" Sakurako-san says, looking at the shelves and inside the desk.

She takes a small bottle off of the shelf. It looks like snake scales suspended in some kind of liquid. I wonder if that kind of thing is trendy or something.

"It's not a respectable hobby. It's basically just messing with corpses," The father spits out.

Sakurako-san frowns.

"But he's started making nice bags and wallets recently. He even made a book cover for my birthday," The sister tries to explain, but the father brushes her off. "He used to make crafts with the skin of other animals, but he particularly liked snakes. Sometimes he would take the skin off a rabbit, cook the meat, then serve it." The sister keeps trying to explain to us.

There's thick needles and sheets of leather lying on the table.

"But because of that, the police found a lot of traces of blood stains…" The mother says quietly. I didn't notice her coming up behind the father. She seems troubled.

"That's right. With luminol, you can't tell the difference between human and animal blood."

Since the mattress he used was originally used for guests, the "unknown human DNA" caused problems for police.

“Because of that, the police were digging around a lot. Thanks to this, all our reservations have been cancelled. The police are just doing their jobs, but he was my son. It’s like they’re trying to put us out of business.” The dad spits out, sounding disgusted. Sakurako-san narrows her eyes.

“Oh? Are you saying that keeping up appearances is more important than mourning your son and finding out the truth?”

“Are you trying to say I’m heartless? This is the hospitality industry. I have a duty to support my wife and daughter after all that’s happened,” He says, grabbing both of Sakurako-san’s upper arms tightly and pulls on her.

“What are you doing!”

“Enough already. Leave! You’re bothering us!”

I hurriedly try to get between them, but he grips even harder and tries to pull both of us out of the lodge. Sakurako-san angrily hits him with her elbow, causing him to let go of her arms.

“You want us to leave? People have died! I won’t go home until I clearly understand why.”

“Wh… What’s with you?! Did you come here so you could join my son?!”

I would have liked for this to have gone peacefully, but it ended up like this anyway. I regret bringing her with me, but it felt like the right time.

“Sakurako-san, we’re being a bother. Let’s head back for now.”

I want to leave this place quickly because the dad’s tone is scaring me. If there’s a knife somewhere, I’m worried about what his anger would make him do.

“There’s one thing I’m worried about.”

“No, Sakurako-san.”

This time I’m the one trying to pull Sakurako-san away. She doesn’t shake me off rudely, but she’s stronger than me, so I can’t make her budge.

“The report on TV said the woman’s body was found at Blue Pond.” Sakurako-san ignores the dad, and speaks to the sister and anxious mom.

“Was it not?” The sister asks, sounding confused.

“Roughly speaking, it’s not incorrect. Also, the police roped off the whole area to keep tourists away even though it was far from the scene, right?”

“Y-yeah…”

“Looks like you understand. Want to go to the scene?”

The sister and mom exchanged glances.

“Well… Of course, we want justice for that woman...” The sister’s voice shakes. The mom looks to the ground, trembling.

“Well, whatever. That’s not what I’m trying to get at. Basically, Nozomi Mikimoto’s body wasn’t facing in the right direction.”

“Huh?”

I can hear both the sister and the mother gasp. The father’s face is bright red, but he doesn’t know what to say.

“Boy, where did we find the woman’s body?”

“Umm… On the gravel where the Biei River meets Blue Pond. It was next to, but not fully in Blue Pond.”

“And was that the way the corpse was facing?”

"…No."

As I'm answering her questions, I remember that Sakurako-san was digging around a bit when we found the young man's corpse.

"The woman was found at the back of the pond. It was at the end of the curve where the river and pond meet. The man's body wasn't looking there. If he had originally abandoned the body in the river, he would have known to look there," Sakurako-san says with a smile. No, more like a laugh. "Perhaps the person who left the man's corpse was confused by the reports of 'a body discovered at Blue Pond.' Your son's corpse was facing the pond, but it was completely unrelated."

The sound of Sakurako-san's laughter echoes in the lodge. The father takes a deep breath.

"Cut it out! Don't mock us!" He yells angrily and raises his hand. Is he about to hit her?!

"Stop it!" The sister screams.

At the same moment, my body moves on its own. I don't want to get hit, and I was scared of being stabbed. Fear wells up inside me. Before I can even think, I've put myself between Sakurako-san and the father. I shut my eyes tight and brace for the impact. There's no pain. Instead, I hear the unique sound of someone falling to the floor. When I open my eyes again, the sister is laying on the floor. Her cheek is red. She gets right back up and clings to her father.

"Please, just go home! Please!" She shrieks.

Sakurako-san looks shocked that she took the hit in her stead. I quickly grab her hand and run out of the lodge. I can hear the father yelling in anger, but I don't dare look back. I head straight to where we parked the car. I'm worried about the sister, but if we'd stayed, he would have gotten even angrier. I pull the car door open, and practically push Sakurako-san into the driver's seat.

"How could you do that?! What were you thinking?!" I climb into the passenger's seat and shut the door. As she starts the car, anger wells up inside me.

"You don't need to yell. I was just wondering if the man really committed suicide," Sakurako-san says with a grimace.

"Huh? He died by hanging himself, didn't he?"

The marks on the neck should be clearly different between a hanging suicide and murder by strangulation. The police wouldn't miss such a basic thing.

"There's also the reaction to wounds, purple spots on the body, and the marks on the neck from scratching at the rope. In general, you wouldn't have scratch marks unless you remained conscious for at least a little while. The corpse we found had no such marks."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Let's see… Mikimoto's death was an atypical hanging."

An atypical hanging means the body isn't completely suspended by the neck, like if their bum is on the ground.

"It's usually easy to tell if it was a suicide or murder with hangings. However, there's an exception with atypical hangings if you hoist the rope like a shoulder throw in judo. The father was rather tall and well built, but the mother and sister were quite short. The young man wasn't very tall, either."

"I… I see…"

“In other words, the only one in that household who could have killed Nozomi Mikimoto was the father.”

“That can’t be!” Isn’t that kind of a hasty conclusion?

“His body was just an atypical hanging. A strong man like that would be able to strangle and carry his son on his back.”

“The culprit could be a third party, couldn’t it? Like a random attacker, or something”

“Then how do you explain the suicide note? It was handwritten. Don’t you think the family would be able to tell if he wrote it based on the handwriting?”

“Someone could imitate his handwriting…”

“I can’t deny the possibility. But there’s something they say about murderers-“

“They know the victim 80% of the time.” I say it before she can.

“That’s right… Have I told you that before?” Sakurako-san gives a surprised blink, then nods.

To be precise, it wasn’t her that taught it to me. I just thought it was her. It was Phantom, who might be Hanabusa, that said that to me.

“Assuming the woman was killed first, the man would have chosen to hang himself near, or looking in the direction of, the spot he left the body. A corpse can’t walk from the river to the pond. He wouldn’t have known the body had moved down river and into the pond.”

“So basically, it’s weird that they were both found at Blue Pond?”

“I wonder. I think there’s a reason they specifically chose that place. If he had died while thinking about the woman in the suicide note, he wouldn’t have picked that spot.”

“Is that so…”

I get what she’s trying to say, but is there really enough evidence to make such a bold claim? Maybe he just couldn’t find a good tree to hang himself from, or thought the scenery there was nice? Sakurako-san bites her lip in response to my half-convinced arguments. She seems annoyed by something, but I don’t know why.

“…My mother chose a cherry tree.”

“Huh?”

“My mother chose to hang herself from a cherry tree. That’s the tree I was named after. She always hated me, so she chose that spot. I was always a source of anguish for her,” Sakurako-san says faintly.

Her voice is so quiet that she almost gets drowned out by the sound of the music coming from the car stereo. What a sad confession. I can’t disagree with her anymore.

“Then… What reason would the parents have for killing their own son?”

It’s true that the Mikimoto family had a strange feel to them. It was like there was something we couldn’t see going on under the surface. Still, that’s no reason to kill someone. And how exactly does this relate to the woman’s body we found before?

“I don’t know. But it’s fine, let’s go,” Sakurako-san says curtly, then starts driving.

“Go where?”

“Mikimoto’s room had an aquarium, a heater, and a large freezer.”

“So what?”

“A person living alone doesn’t necessarily need such a big freezer, right? There must be some reason for it to be there. He must have had to freeze things he didn’t want the rest of the family to see.”

“It couldn’t be… The head?!”

“Hahaha! You sure think of interesting things.”

“Huh? What?”

Sakurako-san laughs at me. I’m not happy that I’m being laughed at, but I’m a little happy that she’s not feeling down. I’ll just have to brush it off. I’m still doubtful, but I lay back in my seat and watch the trees roll by out the window.

Part 7

Our destination isn’t far. Sakurako-san parks the car 10 minutes after we leave Pension Miku. We’re back where this all started. The house of Tainaka-san, the snake breeder, near the back of Blue Pond where the woman’s body was found. Fortunately, Tainaka-san is home, and greets us with a smile even though we didn’t give any advance warning. As soon as he opens the door, Sakurako-san asks him a question.

“Do you know Nozomi Mikimoto?”

“…What’s this about Nozomi-kun?”

“So you do know him.”

We’re offered some blood red haskap juice. Sakurako-san makes a sour face, then confidently accepts.

“You said before that there was someone who lives nearby that also keeps snakes.”

“…I hear he committed suicide. He was a polite, serious boy.”

So the aquariums in Nozomi Mikimoto-san’s room were for keeping snakes. There were rats in the freezer. Rats for feeding the snakes.

“I sold him some. He succeeded in breeding them several times, as well. I also gave him some dead individuals. Well… He was just trying to get the skin from the snakes. Still, he asked for advice several times about raising large, beautiful snakes. Hearing about his suicide… really shocked me.”

Tainaka-san sighs deeply, his eyes full of sadness. It feels like the first time I’ve seen someone grieve the loss of Nozomi Mikimoto-san, and shed tears for him.

“Did he ever tell you anything about his girlfriend?”

“No. I never really asked him about personal things like that. All I know is that he has a nice, pretty older sister.” He mumbles, realizing that he said something unnecessary.

There’s a bit of an age gap, but he seems to be single. I wonder if they have anything in common they could talk about?

“Putting that aside for now, didn’t you come to see Nozomi-kun’s stuff?”

“See what?”

“Nozomi-kun’s sister didn’t know what to do with his snakes when he died, so she gave them to me.”

He takes us to the room where he keeps his snakes again.

“Amazing… Is this one a crow morph Japanese striped snake, too?”

“Yeah. I’ve worked with Japanese striped snakes for a long time, but it’s rare to see one this big.”

There's a deep black snake that is at least twice as big as the one Tainaka-san has coiled up in the tank. It's terrifyingly large, but also beautiful.

"It's amazing how big it is…" Sakurako-san says in admiration.

"Striped snakes are usually around 80-150cm long. I've seen individuals around 180cm, but this one surpasses that. It's close to 200cm long," Tainaka-san says proudly with his arms outstretched.

He has a lot of good things to say about his late friend.

"Plants and animals don't always respond to your effort, no matter how much care you put into raising them. But if you don't care for them properly, they won't thrive. I think he understood how precious life was, but…" Tainaka-san's expression quickly turns grim. "But… There's one thing that worries me."

"What is it?"

Tainaka-san hesitates for a moment. He looks like he's wondering how to phrase it.

"I don't mean that there's anything wrong. It's just something a little weird… Snakes are surprisingly delicate. When their environment changes, they sometimes regurgitate their food. This snake was startled by the move, so it spit something up when it got here," he says nervously.

He goes into the back room where he has a freezer to store rats and such. He takes "something" out and brings it over to us.

"What's that?"

"It's partially digested already. I don't want to believe it…"

"This is…"

It's a long, narrow object. It's dark reddish-brown, with some white spots exposed along it.

"What do you think?"

Sakurako-san stares at the grotesque object, and picks it up in a plastic bag.

"This is… A snake bone."

"Snake?! But, wait, it regurgitated its food?!"

"That's right. Striped snakes are particularly violent, and will eat other snakes. They have to be kept separately. If it ate another snake, I would have had to be intentional."

"Is it common to feed snakes to other snakes?" I ask. Tainaka-san shakes his head no.

"At least, I wouldn't. If there was human meat on the dinner table, would you eat it?"

I get goosebumps, and shake my head. Having it phrased like that makes it seem even weirder and creepier, and makes me feel sick.

"Why would Mikimoto-san do that?"

Sakurako-san falls silent, apparently not hearing my question.

"Sakurako-san?"

"I see, so that's why. The bones are connecting."

"Huh?"

She suddenly starts murmuring, and peeks into the tank with the giant snake.

"So it's the one he really wanted to kill… Honestly, how stupid."

Part 8

We leave Tainaka-san's house just as abruptly as we arrived. He's been so kind to us from beginning to end even though we haven't had very good manners. We'll have to come visit again sometime. Sakurako-san has been silent this whole time, as if she's thinking about something.

"Oh yeah. Um… Why don't we leave flowers where Mikimoto-san's body was found?"

It's not like I'm deeply religious or anything. However, I feel bad that we left flowers for the woman right in front of him, and didn't bring any for him. We head back to Blue Pond once again. It looks like there's lots of other visitors today based on the amount of cars in the parking lot. It must be because it's not widely known that another body was found here. I notice one of them is a light blue compact car. Sakurako-san seems to have noticed the same thing. We start to walk around the pond.

As I thought, we see Nozomi-san's older sister, Kanae-san, in the crowd. She's standing there with her hair flowing in the wind after she takes out her braid. She's not at the spot where Mikimoto-san's body was found. Instead, she's at the back of the pond where the woman's body was. I don't call out to her at first. It just doesn't seem like the right time. Eventually, she notices us and bows gently.

"These flowers… Were already here when I got here," she says, looking at the withered, white bouquet.

"Yeah, we're the ones who put them there."

"Really? Why?"

"We didn't mean to lie to you, but… We're the ones who found the woman's corpse."

I give her a rough explanation to make up for what we didn't tell her before. I tell her about how we found the woman's body, then found her brother's corpse when we came to leave flowers. She looks heartbroken when I tell her about it. She feels horrible for me after learning that I saw another corpse, on top of seeing her brother's. Of course she would. I got used to seeing corpses after a while, but it was traumatic at first. I had nightmares for days on end after seeing my first human skeleton. For better or for worse, that memory doesn't faze me anymore. Actually, it's definitely a bad thing. I've seen countless corpses since then, too.

"Still, this is good timing. We were thinking of visiting you after this."

I was worried about her violent father, though. Sakurako-san notices that Kanae-san's cheek is still red.

"I'm sorry you got hurt because of me."

"No, I'm sorry that my father almost hurt you." Kanae-san bows deeply. "…I thought I might see you two if I waited here." Kanae-san says suddenly after a while of silence.

She nervously clenches her hand.

"I see. In that case, I'll cut to the chase. Did you know about your brother's true intentions?"

"My brother's… What?"

She looks confused. Or rather, maybe she's disturbed.

"I see. Let's change the wording. Are you aware that your brother was trying to kill your family? Or that he hated your parents so much that he seriously tried to kill them via curse?"

"..."

Is this silence a “yes”, I wonder? Kanae-san looks at Sakurako-san, then casts her gaze downward.

“Is that a yes, then? Who was he targeting? Your father?”

“...Why? Why are you asking me about this?”

“Because of the snake,” Sakurako-san says clearly.

“There’s a curse called kodoku. You put a bunch of bugs or snakes in a container, let them eat each other, and the last one remaining is used for the curse. I don’t believe in it, though. However, your brother was seriously trying it, wasn’t he?”

Kodoku. I’ve heard of it several times before. It’s mentioned in manga and such. It’s used by sorcerers, and people like that. Since cannibalism is taboo, it makes you think of ancient magic when you use the one bearing that burden in the curse.

“That huge, dark, crow morph snake was probably raised on that hatred. He wanted his father to be killed by the largest, strongest one that had massacred its brethren. It’s quite a strange story. Why do something so foolish when there’s other, more effective methods?”

That’s right. Why didn’t he choose a different method? Maybe he didn’t want to commit a crime directly so that he can’t be punished by the law. I don’t know what his intentions were, but… Such a wicked, bizarre method makes me think something wasn’t right with him.

“Actually… I don’t think he really believed in it. He was only half convinced. Even though his method was so unreliable, he couldn’t help but cling to it.”

“Why?”

“...I want the same thing, after all. The person cursed by the poison from the snake will suffer when they die.”

Eventually, having finally given up, Kanae-san gives a self-deprecating smile.

“I would have done the same thing if I was in my brother’s position. I would have killed our dad. I would also choose the method that causes the most suffering.”

“Kanae-san?!”

“My brother’s wish was to torment our dad. Just killing him would be pointless. He has to feel a pain worse than death so he really regrets what he’s done. That’s how deep our hatred is.”

Kanae-san takes a cigarette out of her pocket and lights it with her trembling hands. I’m a little surprised. With her mori girl fashion and calm demeanour, she doesn’t seem like the smoking type. She takes a deep puff, and exhales a cloud of smoke.

“Let’s see… It all started when my little sister, Miku, committed suicide when we lived in Tokyo. We don’t know why, even now. Our father was shocked that he knew so little about his own daughter. So, he decided that we’d rebuild our family in Biei.”

Pension Miku… I thought it was a nice name, but to think it had such a sad origin…

“My father was a diligent man. He worked hard, and he was always there for his family. I think he was a little too enthusiastic about education, though. But that’s how he was in the past. He decided on the whole move to Biei on his own. He never said a word about it to mom, even when he quit his old job.”

“No way… He didn’t even ask for your opinion about moving?”

“Nope, he never said a word about it. Over summer vacation, my brother and I were up and taken away from our friends. My father was trying to create a perfect, happy family that managed a business together. If anyone complained, he would become violent and angry.”

Cigarette smoke spills out with her words.

"And so, he became a selfish person. My mom never spoke up about her own opinions, or argued against my father. After my sister died, my father started trying to learn everything he could about the rest of the family. He was obsessed with making sure nothing like that happened again," she says indifferently, waving her cigarette around.

Her father ruled over the family, and violence in the name of "discipline" waited for anyone who spoke up. She says that she would be locked in a room without access to food or the bathroom until she admitted she was wrong. Eventually, Nozomi-san went crazy. He became stubborn and rebellious, no matter how angry his father got. He would be rude or violent towards guests, doing everything he could to cause problems for his father. He didn't care what kind of punishment he got for it.

"And so, my father had no choice but to isolate my brother in his own room. I felt bad for my brother, being locked up. I secretly made a key and gave it to him while my father was out. I intended to give him freedom. I wish he had escaped."

But what would happen if he ran away? After he graduated high school, he gave up on higher education, and he couldn't get a job. He didn't have enough money to live on his own. He had to rely on his parents. In reality, there's nowhere for runaways to go.

"He hated our dad so much that he chose revenge over freedom. 'I will definitely make our father suffer,' he said."

Kanae-san closes her eyes and turns her head toward the sky as ash falls from her cigarette. She looks like she's trying to run away from the memories.

"There was one time that Nozomi fed our dad a snake, saying that it was rabbit meat. Eventually, I noticed that Nozomi was being violent toward the female guests at the pension."

"Wh…"

He wanted to ruin his father. That anger escalated. He might have wanted to be reported. Even if they didn't report him, the women he went after wouldn't visit the pension again. With no repeat guests, they'll get a bad reputation. Destroyed by hatred, he used the screams of women to fill himself.

"…I knew I should have said something, but I couldn't do it. I didn't know how to tell my dad what my brother was doing. Besides, I'm also scared of our dad. He found out about the duplicate key. I knew it was going to be terrible, but I prioritized my own defence."

Regret, repentance, and anger. She resents her father, her brother, and herself. A tear falls from her eye. She was careful not to leave the women alone so her brother couldn't target them, but his assaults escalated every day.

Then finally, one day, a guest disappeared. A beautiful, 24 year old woman who was travelling alone. Kanae-san found the missing woman's phone in her brother's room. She immediately realized her brother had done something, but couldn't tell anyone. She decided to secretly dispose of the phone, and pretend she didn't know anything. While thinking that the woman must have escaped from her brother, a body at Blue Pond was found.

"While being interrogated, my brother was furious, screaming and struggling. I told him to stay calm because I was on his side, but unfortunately, our parents heard. My brother ignored his fear and screamed that he would kill our dad."

"I'll curse you to death! I'll make sure you die more slowly and painfully than any natural death! I'll destroy everything precious to you!" He screamed.

Apparently their mother grabbed a rope while he was screaming. I don't know what their mother was planning to do with that gardening rope. Maybe both parents just wanted to tie down the rampaging little brother with a rope. But the rope got wrapped around his neck. Their mother hugged him tightly so he couldn't move his arms while their father strangled him with their backs together. He must have done it that way so he didn't have to see his son's face as he murdered him. As a result, the police didn't even question whether it was a suicide or not.

"My parents were crying over his lifeless corpse. They couldn't just leave him like that. It wasn't for their sake, but for Nozomi's. They made the note, and pretended it was suicide. They left his body at Blue Pond, but as you said, they didn't know where the woman's body was. Besides, the corpse was heavy, so it was hard for them to move it too far."

So the reason it looked like an atypical hanging was because he wasn't hanged from a tree in the first place. I feel sorry for the women he assaulted, plus he ended up being a murderer.

"I was constantly anxious. What was I supposed to do? It's not like I could tell anyone. I at least wanted to know who the woman he killed was, but the address and name she had on her reservation didn't exist," Kanae-san says, looking at the bouquet we left.

It's the same spot where we found the naked corpse of a woman, whose name we don't even know. She was robbed of the beauty of life.

"...Her parents might still be out there, waiting for her to come home. I feel like I have to find out who she is, so that I can atone for what my brother did," Kanae-san says as she drops her cigarette to the ground.

Tears quietly spill down her cheeks.

"But my brother spoke to me in a dream. This time, I'll get revenge on our father. My parents are relieved that he's gone! They killed him! Maybe it wasn't even a dream, it was his ghost talking to me."

"Revenge isn't going to solve anything…!" I yell.

Kanae-san wraps her arms around herself. Her hands are pale and trembling.

"I know that! I know that, but…"

Kanae-san shakes her head back and forth.

"Ghosts don't exist," Sakurako-san says with a shrug. "It's just an illusion formed from your regret. The dead can't speak. They don't want anything. There's no need for you to do anything for their sake. There's no need to get back at your father just because your brother wanted it. Of course, it's a different story if you, yourself, want revenge."

"What do you know about me?!"

"I don't know anything, nor do I want to. But I do know what you're thinking, at least a little bit."

"...What do you mean?" Kanae-san asks, crumpling her face.

"There's that thing you didn't leave to Mr. Tainaka. Or I guess I should call it 'that creature' instead?"

The blood immediately drains from Kanae-san's face.

"A curse alone cannot kill a person. So naturally, he had another method in mind. Am I wrong?"

"..."

“The pit viper. Your brother was raising one that he caught. He also carried a portable poison remover. He learned how to capture them from Mr. Tainaka. However, when Mr. Tainaka got the snakes, there was no pit viper. In other words, you’re keeping it now. The pit viper is quite hardy, so it shouldn’t die easily even if you don’t take care of it well.”

“A pit viper… Kanae-san, you didn’t…”

She falls to her knees.

“I felt like it was what my brother would have wanted… He left that snake for me so I could do this…”

Tears roll down Kanae-san’s cheeks once more. Sakurako-san breathes a big sigh.

“...It can’t be helped. Boy, you go hiking. Tell this foolish woman.”

“Huh?”

I’m surprised by suddenly being spoken to. I know what she wants me to say, though.

“Um… Kanae-san. Pit vipers can’t kill a person unless something goes very wrong. The mortality rate is under 1%. The venom is strong, but it doesn’t spread through the body very quickly. It can still be dangerous if you’re stuck in a bad situation, though.”

Pit vipers are scary. It’s the only venomous snake in Hokkaido. My grandpa who likes hiking taught me about them. They’re not like cobras where you’ll die if you’re bitten, though. If you suck out the venom right away, or get an antivenom, you’re unlikely to die. The most important thing is to not be bitten, or stay calm if you are.

“It’s as he says. Your brother wanted your father to feel something more painful than death. There’s little doubt that that’s the reason he was raising a pit viper. However, he must have known that the venom wouldn’t kill his father. Therefore, he wasn’t asking you to kill your father.”

“No…” Kanae-san drops to her knees.

It doesn’t seem to bother her that she’s getting dirty from the gravel.

“But… I can’t let things stay like this. I wouldn’t know what to do with myself. I’m just like my mother, blindly obedient towards my father. I don’t know how to think for myself, but… I absolutely won’t let things stay the way they are. I have to change it, for my brother’s sake!” Kanae-san cries, clutching the gravel in her first.

Her frail voice makes my chest feel tight just from listening to her. Sakurako-san looks at the ground, averting her gaze from Kanae-san.

“In that case, please report this.”

I take my phone out of my pocket.

“...Huh?”

“Please report it. Tell the police what your father did, and what you did. Tell them the truth,” I say.

“But…”

“I think spreading the truth is the only justice you can reasonably get. This isn’t the same as revenge. It’s not as painful as what happened to your brother. But in the end, I think you have to atone for your sins. That woman’s family must still be looking for her.”

I wonder what charges she’ll face? Abandoning a corpse? She acknowledged her brother’s crime, and didn’t tell anyone to protect him. She was basically an accomplice in the woman’s murder. I know she’ll likely face a harsh punishment. Maybe it’ll be a little lighter if she

turns herself in. Even if her sentence is lighter, it won't make her parents' crimes go away. It'll be a thorny path for her, going forward.

"If you atone for your sins, I'm sure you'll be forgiven. If I were your brother, I would want you to be saved."

I dial 110 on my phone and hand it to her. All she has to do is press the call button.

"But… This won't help my brother, right? I don't want to pin the crime on him. If I were him, I might have done the same thing!"

"Then your brother also would have done the same thing if he were in your situation. Just like how you tried to save him. It's just as he said. You'll atone for your sins with your brother," Sakurako-san says. She takes my phone, pushes the call button, and hands it to Kanae-san.

It immediately connects to the police, and Kanae-san takes a deep breath.

"I have something to say about a current case-"

Final part

We enjoy the scenery at Blue Pond while we wait for the police to arrive. Just like the first time I came here, there's no signs of life. It's just still and silent.

"Even at a time like this, I still think it's pretty," Kanae-san says to herself.

"From now on, I'm sure there'll be a lot of trouble at home. I don't think my father will ever get the 'happy family' he wants. When things get tough, I'll just remember the view here."

"Your life belongs to you, not your father or brother. It's yours alone. You can make your family however you want. If you don't want to live the life you have now, just change it," Sakurako-san says.

I ask Kanae-san if we can take the pit viper tank. I'll make sure to secretly bring it to Tainaka-san later. He can handle her murder plot.

"...My brother always said he wanted to be reborn. He wanted to kill our father and get a fresh start. Unfortunately, just like snakes, we're still the same even if we shed our skin. But… I wonder if I could really emerge like a butterfly, like he said."

Kanae-san says, looking at a flower I don't know the name of under a birch tree.

"...Emerge?"

I freeze up.

"Yeah, my brother used the word 'emerge.' He said it the night before he died. He said he was a butterfly, not a snake now. That he's finally figured out how to do it."

"Why… A butterfly? Did he have any contact with someone else who gave him advice?" Sakurako-san asks, squeezing Kanae-san's arm.

"Umm… I'm sorry, but I don't know anything at all. My brother didn't have a cell phone or computer or anything… He might have visited an Internet cafe at some point, though," Kanae-san says, confused by the sudden change in atmosphere. Her face twists in pain.

I quickly push Sakurako-san away from her.

"Have you found the skull from the woman he killed in his room yet?"

"No…"

"Has he been interested in butterflies for a while?"

“No, he started talking about them so suddenly that it stood out as strange and memorable. He used to only like snakes.”

Kanae-san adds that he was probably just obsessed with snakes because their father hates them, but her words don’t seem to reach Sakurako-san anymore. Soon, the sound of sirens starts approaching.

“It’s such a terrifying sound…” Kanae-san says, curling up into a ball.

“I’m sure it’s the sound of a new beginning, though,” I say to Kanae-san.

She smiles at me, then takes a powerful step forward toward the police officers, mustering all her strength.

Epilogue

It’s been two weeks since we saw off Kanae-san at Blue Pond. Though it was difficult, they figured out the identity of the woman who was found. The Mikimoto family found her personal belongings. She had been arrested on several charges of fraud. Apparently her modus operandi was to pretend to be someone’s girlfriend in order to swindle money out of them. Still, that’s no reason for her to die.

Unfortunately, we still don’t know if Nozomi-kun had some kind of connection to Hanabusa. I’ve been thinking about him recently. Maybe he really doesn’t exist, like the police say. But… if that were true, who was I exchanging emails with?

Asahikawa is a city of flowers. As June arrives, the scent of flowers overflows from the town. Butterflies are also dancing about. Seeing them makes me tremble. At least I haven’t noticed any signs of Hanabusa recently. Maybe he’s lost interest in us. Yeah, that must be it. There’s no reason for me to fear these little bugs anymore. Thinking like that is the only way to ease my anxiety. Eventually, I began to wonder if he was ever really after us in the first place. He helped me a lot when I was stuck in the hospital, at least. Gradually, the words he left me with sink deeper into my mind.

“Justice only truly exists inside people.”

When I was a kid, good and evil was a black and white concept. I believed that justice would always prevail. But now, I don’t have those fragile, convenient phrases to fall back on. One day, early in the summer, a letter arrived for me.

“...What is this?”

The name of the sender isn’t on it. Still, I’m drawn to the heavy envelope. I open it up, and find a picture inside. I freeze as soon as I pull the picture out and see what it is.

“Eek!”

Something spills out of the envelope. It looks like white flower petals.

“Butterfly… Wings?”

My heart jumps into my throat. I drop the envelope and fall to my knees.

Special short story: Three Kings

Spring is the season for wild vegetables. The first thing you can harvest after the snow melts is the Siberian onion. It's delicious in genghis khan, which is indispensable for cherry blossom viewing. Most of the wild plants that represent Hokkaido smell like garlic and chives. They give off quite a stink just from pulling them apart, especially when they're freshly harvested. You can't tell by the smell, but they give dishes a unique texture and flavour. I know it'll make the whole classroom smell like Siberian onions tomorrow, but I just can't resist ohitashi, gyoza, and fried vegetables.

The runner up is the adzuki grass. It's a wild vegetable that smells like adzuki beans when cooked. It's crispy, tender, and best of all, sweet. When I was a kid, I didn't like eating bitter vegetables like spinach, but I always loved those. Butterbur sprouts, mitsuba, brackens, fiddlehead ferns, and bamboo sprouts are all other delicious springtime plants to harvest.

Today, the main dishes are Siberian onions and adzuki grass. According to my grandpa, whose hobby is exploring the mountains, the best time to go collect wild vegetables is about a week after the cherry trees in the garden start blooming. Of course there's cases of people going missing while picking wild vegetables every year, so I'm always careful.

This year all three of my grandpas are getting together, which is unusual. With me included, four of us are going. All of them have their own lives, so it's not often that they all get to meet face to face. The main reason is that Mother's Day is coming up soon. I wanted to get something for my mom, so the wild vegetables from today are perfect.

"Oh dear, the smell is really strong when you pick it yourself."

My maternal grandpa says, cringing from the smell.

My grandpa who likes jazz used to be a chef, and he's always witty and cool. The bridge of his nose sticks out and he has bushy, white hair. He's always neatly groomed, like a British gentleman. His voice is always calm, and I've never heard him shout. He always speaks politely, and if I ever behave badly, a tedious lecture awaits. As you'd expect, he isn't wearing a tweed suit and hunting cap to go foraging. However, when my grandpa wears it, even a normal windbreaker looks strangely nice.

"They might smell bad, but they sure taste delicious. Natural really is better," my grandpa says, smiling.

"You can say that again. The strong aroma goes well with olive oil pasta. Just salt, oil, and Siberian onions are great, even if you don't add the bacon."

"Wow, that sounds so good."

Please make it for me.

My judo grandpa, who is next to me, sighs. Maybe he's tired from work. I hate to say it, but he's a bit of what you'd call a muscle head. He's not very good with detailed things.
My grandfather who does judo and lives in Nagayama is the father of my older brother's dead mother. Worried about being estranged from my brother, my mom has stayed close with my grandpa's family even after she got remarried and my dad died. My Nagayama grandpa's house is the only family where my grandma is alive. She would often call me over to her house to lessen the burden on my mom when she was busy with work. Sometimes I forget that we aren't related by blood.

I also happened to meet Sakurako-san when I was at my Nagayama grandpa's house. I have to thank my grandpa's luck for that meeting. He's a bit pushy about making me learn judo, though.

"Are we going to pull all of this up?" My Nagayama grandpa sighs again.

"If we did that, we wouldn't have any next year." Another grandpa gives me a pat on the shoulder.

"That's right. It's just as he said. Siberian onions take a long time to grow."

Siberian onions only have one leaf for several years after they germinate. Apparently it takes six or seven years for them to get a second leaf. Wild vegetables are a blessing from the mountains. The mountains give so many things life. In order to ensure that there's more for years to come, there's a rule to only take a plant if you see two more. You can't just pick them recklessly. You have to leave two thirds of the plants alone in a patch. My other grandpa, nicknamed mountain grandpa, is always lamenting about the decreasing number of wild plants due to people either not knowing, or ignoring the rules.

Mountain grandpa is my paternal grandpa. In other words, my dad's dad. He's tall, slender, and a bit taciturn. He seems like he goes wherever the wind blows him, and he has a pensive air about him. He used to suddenly go on trips and seclude himself in the mountains, so I always thought he was like a humanoid sprite from one of Tove Jansson's books.

He used to hunt deer and bears back in the day, too. He stopped hunting after losing sight in one of his eyes in an accident, though. Thanks to all that, he knows a lot about mountains and edible plants, so we all get to enjoy the fruit of his knowledge in the spring and fall.

Honestly, it's been a while since I went to pick wild plants like this. I wanted to go any time I could when I was in elementary school, but it started to seem like a pain once I got into middle school. I'm both excited and embarrassed to be doing something with all three of my grandpas again. This isn't something I'd say out loud, but… It makes me wonder how many more times they'll all be around to do things like this with me.

Time flies by, even though I feel a little lonely. I've gotten used to sharing the wild vegetables I pick with other people. Since Kougami said in advance that she wanted some, I decide to drop some off on my way home. There's a lot of people and luggage today, so we took my Nagayama grandpa's 7-seater car. It's a Mitsubishi delica D5. The roof is high, so it's perfect for things like this. I leave my exhausted grandpas in the car while I ring Kougami's intercom.

Her house is actually a popular western style restaurant. My stomach rumbles from the smell of hamburgers and fries, but I have to endure it. After this, I'm going to my Nagayama grandpa's house for Ghenis Khan.

"Huh? Where's Sakurako-san?" Kougami greets me with a confused expression.

Today she's wearing a navy blue dress with a cute red ribbon on the chest. She's been wearing more girlish clothes than usual lately, probably due to Azechi's influence. Good job, Azechi.

"I didn't go with her today. I went with my grandpas."

"Huh?"

I should be the one saying that. It's not like I'm with Sakurako-san 24/7.

"What should I do?" Kougami says with a serious expression.

“Did something happen?”

“Yeah. I just got a call from gran. Sakurako-san hasn’t come back from her walk yet.”

“She hasn’t gone home yet?”

“Yeah. Since I knew you were picking wild vegetables, I told gran she might have gone with you. I couldn’t connect to your phone.”

“Ah, yeah, the mountain is out of range.”

I take my phone out of my pocket. On top of the notifications saying I got a call while out of range, I’ve received some texts. Kougami is worried, so she calls gran again.

“Ah, this is Yuriko. Hello… Yeah, did Sakurako-san come back? I was wondering… I see, got it… No, it’s fine! Tatewaki-kun is still out of range, so the two of them must be in the mountains together.”

Kougami reassures gran by saying my grandpas are with me. She hangs up after saying she’ll take Hector for his evening walk since Sakurako-san usually does it. Her pale face contrasts her cheerful voice.

“She hasn’t come back yet, after all.”

“Since it’s Sakurako-san we’re talking about, maybe she just lost track of time while looking for bones.”

“Until this late?”

Even though I said it, I was thinking the same thing. Anxiety wells up inside of me.

“Where could she have gone? A store?”

“Somewhere with animal carcasses?”

“…”

“An accident” - those two words surface in both of our minds. The more I think about it the more uncomfortable I feel. We decide to bring Hector for the time being. Sakurako-san might still come back on her own. With that in mind, Kougami and I head back to the car. My grandpas, who are tired and have been waiting in the car, immediately start causing a ruckus.

“Hey, Shoutarou! Your friend is a girl!” My Nagayama grandpa laughs, poking fun at me.

“She’s a girl, but she’s my friend. That’s it,” I reply, flustered.

My mountain grandpa and jazz grandpa are grinning. I feel my ears turning red, and look at Kougami. She looks more anxious than embarrassed. This definitely isn’t the time to be talking about this. I ask my grandpas to please drive us to the Kujo residence. My jazz grandpa notices our stern expressions and gently asks if something happened. I feel helpless.

“Well…”

I tell them about the situation, and they all agree that I should contact the police. In theory, I’d agree with them, but in practice, I don’t want to. Even Kougami is looking at me in confusion.

“But… If we did that, I’d feel bad for gran.”

“Why? It’s better for gran too if we report this.”

“Even if we find Sakurako-san safe, she’ll still want to go into the mountain alone again. Gran would be even more worried about her than she already is. I think it’s best if gran doesn’t find out about this.”

“But Shoutarou, shouldn’t you be more worried about the young lady that’s gone missing?” Judo grandpa says.

He does have a point. My thoughts go back and forth. In the end, I can't bring myself to agree.

"Tatewaki-kun, do you even know which mountain she went to?" Kougami says uneasily.

It's frustrating to admit, but I have no idea.

"...Then if we can't find her in 3 hours, we'll go to the police. If we're going to look for her first, we have to do our best. Before that, Tatewaki-san, why don't you try asking your mountain climbing and hunting friends?" Jazz grandpa asks my mountain grandpa.

"What should I tell them?"

"If she drove there, she must have left her car somewhere. Ask if they've seen a car like her's anywhere."

"Got it, I'll ask around."

My mountain grandpa immediately takes his phone out of his pocket. He calls and texts all his acquaintances. My mountain grandpa has more friends and better tech skills than I expected. Meanwhile, we decide to go pick up Hector. Keeping a dog means you have to walk it every day, even if it's stormy out. I'm supposed to be with Sakurako-san, so I stay behind while Kougami goes to get him. She says that gran seemed really worried. We don't say much at all while we walk Hector to Central Park.

No matter how cute it is when Hector glances back at us, it doesn't clear up the darkness we're feeling. However, when the carillon bell in the park chimes for 4pm, my Nagayama grandpa hurries over saying that my mountain grandpa got a call.

"Toward the Pepan River! Apparently there's been a light brown kangoo parked on the side of the road since noon!"

"That's it!"

A chocolate coloured kangoo. It must be Sakurako-san's beloved car. It's such an unusual car, so it has to be her. At first, Kougami wants to go with us to Pepan, however, it's getting late, so my grandpas say no because it would be bad if something happened to her. Kougami looks a bit sulky, but hands me Hector's leash.

"I think it's better if you take Hector with you."

"…Kougami?"

Hector is good at sniffing out death. It feels like a cold blade pierces my heart.

"No, not like that. It's just that Sakurako-san almost definitely has some animal corpses with her, right? Besides, she probably has that smell on her all the time. If it's Hector, I'm sure he can find her."

Yeah, I'm sure of it. I get into the car and hug Hector.

Our search party consists of four people and one animal. My grandpas really wish I wasn't going with them, but I feel like it's my responsibility to make sure she's safe, and help her if she's not. I'm also used to walking through the mountains, thanks to my grandpas. I think my mountain grandpa wanted to go alone, honestly, but if either of them got injured, they wouldn't be able to get back.

"Maybe she isn't lost. She might have just gotten hurt so she couldn't make it back, right?" My Nagayama grandpa says.

It does sound plausible. Sakurako-san never forgets a path she's walked before. My jazz grandpa has to come along, since we didn't want to leave him on his own. Fortunately, we all had mountain trekking gear prepared today.

"I've visited this mountain many times. I have a general idea of where the easy and the dangerous sections are."

I feel better knowing how reliable my mountain grandpa is. I wonder if Hector realizes the situation we're in?

"Do you understand? We're looking for your beloved owner, Sakurako-san." I say to Hector.

He smiles and tilts his head a bit. I'm worried, but Hector still walks ahead, happily panting. I'm praying that he doesn't think he's just on a walk. I hurry along with him, following my grandpa's instructions.

I continue on, relying on the light from tonight's half moon and my own flashlight. I'm scared of losing the path, or running into a bear. There's been sightings of them near the Pepan dam. The fatigue from picking plants in the mountains starts to weigh on all of us. No matter how much I try to push it away, the thoughts of "what if" keep filling my mind.

By 5pm, it's already dark. There's still snow left in the shady parts of the forest. There's limits to how far the easy paths can take you. My mountain grandpa is sceptical of Hector's guidance, but since Hector has been following the path, they end up leading the way side by side. Eventually, Hector picks up on a smell and starts pulling me forward.

"H-Hector?!"

Hector lets out a single, cheerful "woof!" and starts running. I almost get pulled down several times, but my whole body is trembling.

It was Sakurako-san's fault that I encountered my first corpse. Since meeting her, I've seen the corpses of many people. Skeletons, bodies that have been drowned or mummified, adipocere… If the last corpse I see is hers, what would I do from then on? How would I live if I lose Sakurako-san? How could I live in an Asahikawa without her?

"Hector…"

Soon, Hector stops and turns back to look at me with a smile.

"...This isn't her, it's a deer."

The temperature is dropping as it's getting late. Hector is proudly exhaling white clouds of breath while looking at me like he's asking "how did I do?" The corpse is laying on the soil after it had thawed. It's not Sakurako-san's corpse, but one of a young doe.

"This isn't her, Hector… We need to find Sakurako-san. She's missing. Please help us find her."

I hug Hector's neck. He licks my cheek with his warm tongue.

"...Wait. This deer has marks from being disassembled."

"Huh?"

My mountain grandpa speaks in a suspicious voice while shining a light on the deer. A sharp tool was being used to disassemble the deer. It must have been Sakurako-san.

"But why didn't she finish…"

"I think it was too heavy. It's young and small, but it's still an ezo deer, so it must weigh about 40 kilograms. It would be difficult for one woman to carry. She probably realized that as soon as she put the knife in its back."

“Right away?”

Somehow, that doesn’t sound like something Sakurako-san would do. I feel like she would take a 40 kilogram, decomposing deer with her even if she had to drag it.

“Well, whatever. There’s a swamp just a bit further ahead. There’s lots of animals by the bank of it. If I were searching for dead animals, that's where I’d head.”

At mountain grandpa’s urging, Hector and I begin walking again. I still don’t know why Sakurako-san abandoned the deer. I don’t think she would give up just because it’s heavy, like my grandpa said. But in that case, what was the reason?

After walking for 5 minutes, my jazz grandpa starts complaining about knee pain. Soon, Hector stops, and his smooth ears twitch a few times. Unlike the rest of him, Hector’s ears feel like velvet for some reason. He suddenly starts barking. His tails wags excitedly, and he starts running again. He’s much more excited than last time, causing both my anticipation and anxiety to rise.

“This area has several spots that are hollowed out, making small cliffs. It’s dangerous here. If you slip down, you’re likely to get injured.”

I hear mountain grandpa’s warning, but I continue to walk quickly anyway. Finally I see the figure of a person leaning against a mossy log by the swamp below. Hector lets out a shrill bark.

“S-Sakurako-san!”

“Don’t come! Stop!” She yells in a harsh tone at me, who started running over without thinking.

At the same time, my mountain grandpa grabs me from behind and pulls me back.

“Ah…”

The footholds crumple and clumps of dirt and rock fall down. Fortunately, Hector didn’t fall either.

“I told you to stay back,” my mountain grandpa says sharply. He finds a safe spot to descend, and uses a rope to get down to the swamp.

“Sakurako-san!”

I climb down the rope. She’s absolutely covered in mud. I have to resist the urge to grab onto her. She’s sitting under a fallen tree, looking like she’s about to cry. I don’t know whether it’s because she’s happy or sad, but when she looks up at me, she smiles. Her smile looks somewhat lonely.

“...Why are you here, boy?”

“It’s all thanks to my grandpas and Hector.”

I give her a brief explanation of everything that has happened so far. Sakurako-san bows her head and apologizes for causing so much trouble. She’s pale, and looks like she’s in pain.

“Are you okay?” My mountain grandpa asks her.

“I didn’t hit my head, but I hurt my leg and shoulder. I’m in the early stages of hypothermia, and I dislocated my shoulder. I also hurt the anterior talofibular ligament on my left foot.”

“So basically, you dislocated your shoulder and sprained your ankle?”

“I’ll try supporting it with a tree branch.”

My Nagayama grandpa tells Sakurako-san to lay on her back. He stretches her arm out and holds her hand.

“Is this the Hippocrates method?”

“It’s easy to do. Just rotate it until the bone is in place. It hurts a lot, though,” my Nagayama grandpa says as he fixes her shoulder. He’s a qualified judo rehabilitation therapist.

“Urk…!” Sakurako-san lets out a small shriek of pain.

She looks like she’s in so much pain, but I can’t look away. I’m the worst.

“Alright, all done.”

“Don’t you normally rotate it towards the inside?” Sakurako-san says, letting her arm go limp.

“Recent studies have found that using an external rotation makes it less likely to happen again. Well, even if the bone is in place, it’s still inflamed so it’ll hurt for a while. It doesn’t seem like the nerves are damaged, but make sure you see a doctor once you get home.”

I always thought he was a musclehead, so I’m kind of surprised when medical terminology comes out of my Nagayama grandpa’s mouth. I follow jazz grandpa’s instructions and start a fire.

“It seems like early stage hypothermia.”

“Yeah… The shivering started just a little while ago, so I think it’s a pretty mild concern,” my mountain grandpa confirms as he covers Sakurako-san in a blanket and gives her hand warmers.

“Apply them to your neck and abdomen. It’s important to warm up deep inside your body where your organs are,” mountain grandpa says.

Hypothermia is a serious concern for people that go mountaineering.

“It’s good that it’s still in the early stages. In the moderate or severe stages it can be dangerous if you don’t warm up properly. You can get arrhythmia or die.”

Mountain grandpa smiles, saying that he’s glad it’s at a treatable level. I’m worried about Sakurako-san’s injuries, but it would take over half an hour to get to a hospital from here, so we decide to raise her body temperature a bit more before moving her.

“The best way to warm up from the inside is to eat. It helps your body temperature increase faster.”

Before I know it, jazz grandpa is taking out a small saucepan, knife, and the wild vegetables we picked.

“What’s this?” Mountain grandpa asks while holding some leaves.

“They’re small, but they're Japanese knotweed. The name comes from the word for pain relief. It’s said to relieve inflammation and ease pain.”

Mountain grandpa mashes up the knotweed and puts it on Sakurako-san’s sprained ankle while jazz grandpa prepares soup in the small pot. My stomach is growling, but I have to be patient right now. It looks delicious though.

“We also found some angular Solomon’s seal and adzuki grass, so please eat them together. Angular Solomon’s seal is nourishing and warms the body up, and adzuki grass is said to help your lung function.”

It’s a consommé with edible wild plants. It’s a normal soup, but Sakurako-san takes a big mouthful with a curious smile. Her face quickly crumples up.

“...It’s bitter.”

“Well, sweets aren’t going to grow in a place like this. Just drink up, there’s more where that came from.” His tone is soft, but my grandpa’s words aren’t kind.

Sakurako-san quietly drinks her soup while cringing at the bitter taste of the Solomon's seal.

"...It's good, though," Sakurako-san mumbles. Maybe she just got used to the bitter taste.

"Hahaha! Well, food you eat with other people always tastes better." My jazz grandpa laughs happily. He pulls out a pot to boil water and makes us all instant coffee.

Thanks to the blanket, soup, and cuddles from Hector, Sakurako-san's condition starts to improve. Once she's ready, my mountain grandpa guides through a shortcut to get off the mountain. The path is pretty rugged, but it's important to get Sakurako-san to the hospital as fast as we can. When we start moving, Sakurako-san starts complaining.

"I don't… Want to leave it," she says, with a sad expression.

"It? You mean the deer?"

"Oh, so you saw the doe? It was splendid, but that's not what I meant."

"Then what is it?"

She points at the bushes a short distance away. I shine my flashlight on it. I can see a dark, humanoid set of bones.

"Ah!" My jazz grandpa and I scream at the same time

"I-is that a human?!" My Nagayama grandpa asks.

"…No, it's a brown bear. It was young, so it must have just left its mom. During the breeding season, the female bear forces the male bear to leave. Females don't go into estrus when they have a cub to care for. I guess after it was weaned, it got lost in the forest and died," My mountain grandpa says, shining his flashlight on it.

"That's right. I discovered this bear last summer, but it was starting to decompose, and even bear cubs are pretty big. With great heartache, I had to leave it, but I remembered it when I saw that doe," Sakurako-san says happily.

The doe was too heavy, but the bear would have been skeletonized by now. Especially since there's not many tanuki in Hokkaido. That means it would be mostly foxes that would eat the corpse. Tanuki tend to move the bones around and chew on them when they eat, so you see the corpses getting scattered more in places with lots of them, like Honshu. Foxes tend to eat where the corpse is already laying, so the skeleton is left intact. Actually, this young brown bear has remained wonderfully intact with almost no damage.

Apparently Sakurako-san noticed it and tried to go down to the swamp all excited, but she accidentally slipped because the ground was unexpectedly soft due to the melted snow. According to her, she was "too excited and got careless." My grandpa's are astounded by Sakurako-san's extensive knowledge of the brown bear bones.

"If I were your grandpa, I'd be giving you a bonk on the head," my jazz grandpa says with a smile. He's probably serious.

Even so, my mountain grandpa and I end up gathering up the bones. Jazz grandpa is in charge of Hector. He likes Hector and finds him cute, so he's in a good mood even though he's nearing the end of his stamina and his knees are hurting. Hector is clever, and walks with Jazz grandpa the way he does with gran. He goes at a slow pace, and doesn't run around or pull on the leash like he does with me.

“But this is private property. We can’t go through here without permission.”

“I know, we’ll just have to be careful…”

Perhaps it’s because she’s being carried on Nagayama grandpa’s back, but Sakurako-san is being unusually obedient.

My grandpas seem to be aware that she’s kind of the one that caused me to get stabbed in Hakodate. I ask them not to tell my mom about meeting with Sakurako-san. They look torn, but agree, saying there’s no other choice if we don’t want my mom to be worried. None of them tell me not to see Sakurako-san anymore. I guess they understand how I feel about the matter. My Nagayama grandpa says, “a man has to have something to protect.”

We eventually reach the car and head for the hospital. Sakurako-san groans as she pets Hector.

“Is the pain getting worse?”

“Yes… The adrenaline is wearing off now.”

“You should never do things like this alone, okay?”

I know she won’t listen to me, though. She tries to shrug, but it hurts too much.

“But… It’s strange. I had a feeling like you’d come find me.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, that’s why I wasn’t too scared or anxious.” She sighs and closes her eyes.

Seeing her covered in mud, I can’t help but feel grateful that we found her. I’m overjoyed that she trusted me enough to know I’d save her. I’d even go to the moon if that’s what it took to find her. I’m relieved to feel the weight of her head on my shoulder.

Sakurako-san gets checked out at the hospital, but they didn’t find anything too concerning. They hook her up to an IV just to be sure. Eventually, gran comes flying into the hospital room.

“Young lady!”

“I’m sorry for letting her get hurt.”

My jazz grandpa explained to gran that Sakurako-san was picking wild vegetables with us today. He bows as deeply as he can, but gran holds up her hand to stop him.

“It’s fine, I understand. Thank you for looking for her… Honestly, aren’t you two embarrassed to make the young master’s grandpa lie for you?”

“Gran…”

I was the one who decided we should lie. I say that, but gran just looks at me and shakes her head. Gran bows deeply to thank us again, then turns to Sakurako-san. It seems that keeping a secret from gran really is impossible.

“You went and did something dangerous by yourself again! Miss Sakurako, I am very angry with you. What would you have done if something happened to the young master and the others because of this!”

“You’re right, I’m deeply remorseful. Going forward I will try not to let this happen again as much as possib-“ While Sakurako-san is speaking, a sudden, clear sound echoes through the room.

It makes me jump.

“Gran…?”

Gran slapped Sakurako-san’s cheek.

“If something happens to you, I won’t be able to go on living. They will have to prepare two coffins at your funeral!”

“...”

Of course it wasn’t a strong slap. Perhaps it was more heartbreaking than it was painful for Sakurako-san. Everyone here really comprehended gran’s words just now. Gran has always served the Kujo family. She must have attended many funerals for their family members. The next one she attends will definitely be her own. Gran brings the back of her hand to her lips, falls to her knees, and begins to sob.

“...I understand, next time I will really be careful. Don’t cry, Ume.”

However, gran continues to cling to Sakurako-san’s hand while crying. Sakurako-san looks bewildered, and looks to me for help. I can’t say anything, though. It’s hard to imagine how gran is feeling right now.

“...How about this? From now on, carry a GPS with you at all times, and always tell someone where you’re going.” Jazz grandpa finally helps us out, unable to just watch anymore.

“No, that won’t work. Even with a GPS if you’re lost, you’re lost. Be sure to tell someone when I go to the mountains or forests from now on, though,” Mountain grandpa says after introducing himself.

“Grandpa?”

“Anyway, I have free time basically every day. I can help carry your stuff. I’m probably stronger than Shoutarou, and I’m used to seeing dead animals, too,” my mountain grandpa says. Sakurako-san doesn’t know how to react at first.

“No, thank you. I’ve never thought of him as a hindrance. He has to be the one by my side.”

Everyone falls silent. The only sounds are those of gran sniffling, and the ambulance sirens from outside. If she makes a single mistake, she could be carried away in an ambulance just like that, or possibly die. Fears like that slowly creep into my heart.

“…I understand, I’ll do what you want. I won’t go into the mountain alone anymore,” Sakurako-san says.

“Young lady!”

Gran clings to Sakurako-san. Sakurako-san cries in pain, but she ends up sounding like a frog.

“Hahaha!” The rest of us can’t help but laugh at her.

A few days later, gran invites my grandpas and I to dinner. Kougami was invited, too. She was worried because I didn’t contact her right after we found Sakurako-san, so she hit me with a bag when I went to drop off more wild vegetables. I couldn’t argue back when she was hitting me and crying, “why didn’t you tell me sooner?!” She was the one who recommended we bring Hector, so she deserved to be in the know.

“Thank you for all your help.”

“It was nothing.”

After a delightful dinner, gran and my grandpas sit around chatting for a while. Sakurako-san leans over and whispers to me.

“But they helped raise you. They’re like the three kings of the east… or the north, in this case.”

The three kings of the east, also known as the three wise men from the bible.

“They’re the best grandpas you could ask for.”

Yeah, they’re the best. I’m proud of them.